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The Odyssey of Working in Zaatari, a Jordanian Syrian Refugee Camp: The Story of Human
Suffering and Why That Made Me a Pacifist.

by Ziad-Matthew Haddadin



Evil cannot be suppressed by the physical force of the government. The moral progress of humanity is brought about not only by individual truth, but also through the establishment of a public opinion. (Tolstoy 292)

-Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*

At age 16, I decided on the momentous decision to volunteer at a refugee camp in Jordan. The experience is one I'll never forget. It left an indelible influence on my life and, 3 years later, shaped me into the person I am today.

One of the cardinal viewpoints that I've garnered from my trip to Zaatari, the Jordanian Syrian refugee camp, is that violence is a forerunner to more violence. I've concluded that whatever the dilemma may be, no matter how dire the situation, it is never an excuse for committing atrocities in the name of any religious, political, or ideological agenda because of the depravity and suffering that I have observed in my humanitarian trip to the refugee camp. I will present, in this essay, why I affirm such beliefs. I will also recapitulate the ideologies that the Middle East upholds (something with which I am much familiar) and hopefully present my ideas of why war, in any circumstance, is morally wrong and erroneous.

My name is Ziad-Matthew Haddadin. I was born in Newark, New Jersey to Middle Eastern immigrants. The son of a cardiologist and suburban mom, I was 5 years old when I traveled to Johnson City, Tennessee in 2005. Although I was raised in America, I have an American Jordanian citizenship and speak fluent Arabic and English. I was sheltered all my life and never got to experience the outside world except when going to school. During my adolescent stage, I wanted to step out of the hermetic sphere of my household and make a difference in this world. Being naïve, I felt that my presence would be momentous and can make a positive impact in people's lives. That opportunity came when, at age 16, I worked in a refugee camp named Zaatari. It is one of the most populated refugee camps in the Middle East and shelters more than 60,000 Syrian refugees. It is notorious for its poor living conditions and high crime rates. It is located near Amman (which is my hometown) in Jordan. I volunteered to work

there for a week and was assigned to a small group of workers supervised by a manager. My mandate was to help with transporting supplies and necessities, and to care for the children in the camp. My first day there I was excited and energetic. My thought was that I could make a difference there and attempt to lift peoples' spirits. I was transported on a dusty, battered school bus that drove me, my manager, and the contingent of Jordanian workers to the refugee camp daily.

When I arrived there on my first day, everything changed. My first observation was the dilapidated tents, buildings, and cars. I saw several women and men working on reconditioning an oven that was sitting near the tents. There were children slouching on some steps that led to a supermarket. Some of the tents had holes poked in the fabric and others seemed brand new. Litter carpeted the streets and sidewalks. It was a filthy area of the camp. Aside from the sultry atmosphere and the sun beating down on my sweaty forehead, one moment that I vividly recall is that it was quiet. Not the "serene" quiet, but the sort of silence that unsettled and disconcerted me. It was obvious that no one was in a loquacious mood. Our manager directed me to work with the families in one of the tents. As I approach and peered into the tent, there was a mother tending to her young son. The boy looked pale and his skin was yellow; he was laying on a makeshift bed. He had gotten some sort of ailment. The mother then ordered me to give her some cold towels for her sick son. I immediately obeyed and completed the brief task. As I went to retrieve the towels from a nearby medical shack, I saw an array of scenes. From a person getting their leg amputated as he screamed in pain, to children sitting on the stools (they didn't seem joyous either). Wanting the screaming to stop, I covered both my ears as I zoomed to get the towels. I returned with a bundle of cold, damp towels and handed it to her. I then sat on a stool inside the tent as the women cared for her child. Thinking of anyway to uplift her, I ventured to

make conversation with her by first asking on how she is doing thus far. She coarsely told me to shut my mouth. I obeyed and sat in silence for the remainder of the day.

The crass remark from the mother caused me to feel bitter. I wanted to exchange heated rebuttals at her, but I realized that would be foolish of me. Hence, I delivered cold towels and nurtured the sick child in silence. As the day dwindled to an end, the manager came and told me that it was time to go. When I returned home, I sat down and played *Destiny* (my favorite video game). I wanted to forget this day ever happened. And this was my first day working in that camp.

The second day I was instructed to work with the children, but my thoughts were with the sick boy. What happened to him? Is he okay? I asked my manager about the boy and he replied that he died about an hour after we left. Apparently, cholera claimed his life. This camp is notorious for its bad drinking water and shortage of food. A metallic taste filled my mouth as I casually replied, "Oh, okay." I had never experienced this feeling in my life. To vividly meet someone one day and to discover they are dead the next.

I couldn't think about it too much. I had to take care of my current task. I walked towards a group of children and was met with hostility. Apparently, they were in a belligerent mood. I did my best to soothe them down but to no avail. Not wanting to start a scuffle, I left immediately. At this point, I dedicated the rest of my time to transporting supplies because I was attracting unwanted attention, for refugees gave me distasteful looks and the children were displaying more enmity. I decided to flow with the atmosphere at that camp henceforth: keeping my mouth shut, doing constructive tasks, and leaving. It was my method of completing objectives for the rest of the week.

Eventually I knew what was expected. After a brief dialogue with my manager, he admonished me not to say much and just concentrate on my given behests. I did just that for the remaining time working there. During this timeline, I understood the ambiance that gripped the camp. It was one of anguish, privation, and death. I assisted with crude and nascent medical amputations done on injured soldiers and children. I observed bereaved mothers crying over loved ones. I glanced at the battered and decaying tents and cars. I knew the food shortages that clouded the camp in which the children went unfed. I knew people that eventually died during my employment at the camp. I have seen too much death and suffering.

And all of this for what? Why did this have to happen?

During my last few days at the camp, I experienced something novel. One of the children at the camp approached to talk to me. I was nervous at first, but then she hit up a conversation with me and eased my tensions. We sat inside her tent and she introduced herself as Nadia. She was 15 years old. She had moved from Damascus, the capital of Syria (where the heavy skirmishes and coup d'états were), after her entire family was killed in a U.S. airstrike. She was the only survivor and had to fend for herself. She barely had enough nutritious food to last a day, was raped by a Syrian militant, and testified that things are not better in Zaatari.

“I wonder what sin did I or my parents commit to deserve such suffering,” she related to me. “This is life for me every day and I see no hope of it getting better.”

I had nothing comforting or uplifting to say. What was I supposed to say? She then restated why the Middle East loathes the Americans. Ever since the reinstatement of Israel in 1948 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, countries have fallen into disarray because of the U.S. dominance and control over the Middle East. It has become a domino effect. She told me about

the horrible atrocities committed by U.S. troops at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003 and the mistreatment she and her family had to endure. The U.S. soldiers were prejudice and hostile towards the Syrian and Iraqi multitudes. This abuse culminated in anger towards U.S. policy and its citizens. I disclose to her that because I am an American citizen, the refugees emitted animosity towards me even though I speak fluent Arabic and have a Jordanian citizenship. She nodded her head and exclaimed that refugees loathe the opulent and excessive lifestyles that Americans ostentatiously display while the refugees, who had their entire families and homes destroyed, suffer immensely.

“I know it isn’t your fault. You don’t understand the troubles Syrian refugees face, but sometimes our anger is too much,” she said, “We are all suffering.”

I inquired as to how does she know all of this at her age. She replied that she was taught this at school when she was young because it is an important part of the Arabic history. We then discuss more before I was ordered by my manager to leave. I gave her a hug and a kiss on her forehead, wished her well, and left.

It was then that I understood why things happened the way they’ve happened. Why there is so much suffering. For millennia, people believe that the way to conquer evil is through war and sacrifice; through war, they believed they could achieve peace. After observing the suffering bequeathed on these refugees, I realize that war only entails more suffering and outbreaks of savagery. Chris Hedges observes in his 2002 book, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*:

But the goal we seek when we embrace myth [mythic war] is impossible to achieve.

War never creates the harmony or the security we desire, especially the harmony we briefly attain during wartime. And campaigns, such as the one in Afghanistan,

become starting points for further conflicts, especially as we find that we are unable to root out terrorism or maintain the kind of solidarity that comes in the days just after a terrorist attack. (page 22)

I realized this to be true in my voyage to the camp. I realize that Americans, as a community, must strive for the individual truth and, within that truth, establish a public opinion. If we were to understand, educate, and grasp the true devastation of war and its calamities face-to-face, then maybe change would come as a collective community. But pragmatically the only real, constructive action to take is within our own education journey here at college: getting an education and striving for the truth.

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About the Author: Ziad-Matthew Haddadin was born in Newark, New Jersey in 2000 to Middle Eastern immigrants. He and his family moved to Johnson City, Tennessee in 2005. Having an impeccable work ethic, Ziad-Matthew Haddadin was an honor roll student in Science Hill High School and graduated with a 3.9 GPA and 34 ACT score. He was lauded by his high school teachers for being ruthless in his studies and striving to achieve the best grades possible. Ziad has volunteered at Zaatari refugee camp and has worked with Habitat for Humanity. He also volunteers at the hospital, nursery home, and his local church. His favorite hobbies are reading, playing professional piano, and studying.