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Young refugees in Jordan's Zaatari camp are hungry for knowledge

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While Europe is witnessing the massive inflow of Syrian refugees who have made long and perilous journeys in the hope of better prospects, millions of others still remain in Syria's neighbouring countries, caught in a state of liminality or languishing in sprawling refugee camps.

The youth committee who met our delegation of scholars, officials, and public figures from the US and Europe when we visited the Syrian refugee camp of Zaatari in Jordan had a clear message for us.

“We need intellectual interaction more than food; we need to keep our minds alive. Our brains are dying here”.

Ranging in age from 19-29, this group of young men and women described their life in the camp, the small jobs taken up to occupy part of their time and earn some income. Some had been to university for two or three, and sometimes four, years in Syria before they had to flee the country and interrupt their studies.

A 19 year old girl looked at me and uttered words that belied the smile on her face, “I am a dead person in a living body.”

Many are assigned responsibilities inside Zaatari by the attendant international organisations: to look after the children, organise artistic or sports activities or provide psycho-social support. These are all extra-curricular as the Jordanian authorities do not allow any teaching by non-Jordanians. Those who were professional teachers in Syria, mostly women, are therefore ruled-out and can only work as assistants to Jordanian teachers. Cell phones are their most prized objects, their only connection to the world outside. They wait for the two hours of electricity per day to recharge them.

We promised that we would look into opportunities for them. Ismail, the coordinator of the youth committee replied very courteously, “We have received more than 15 international delegations. All promise the same thing but they never come back.”

So it became a moral duty to deliver on our promise. After a long exchange back and forth with the authorities of the camp and a push from the French embassy in Amman, we received the green light to organise a lecture series inside Zaatari in July 2015. The group of academics who was on standby awaiting the approval moved quickly to organise the programme. When we arrived on the first day ninety young men and women showed up. Some were protesting that they had been told too late about the programme, and were begging to be let in, saying they never had a chance to participate in any activities. So the hot gymnasium was rapidly turned into a large conference room to accommodate them all.

As we unveiled our programme: history of international relations, history of the Middle East, US decision-making, experiences in conflict resolution across the world, principles of transitional justice, new practices in humanitarian action, etc.) the 90 participants sat quietly, listened attentively, asked questions respectfully, and eagerly engaged in the discussion.

We needed to be mindful of the concerns of camp authorities, who are wary of any form of political agitation. We made very clear that our programme was about delivering objective and scholarly knowledge without engaging in political discussions about our personal opinions or theirs. Although the attendees were keen to hear us speak bluntly about the Assad regime, its crimes and the perceived indifference of the international community, they understood the constraints and abided by the rules.

The eldest of the young men would ask the first questions; the younger ones would follow. The girls remained silent in the first two days. When I went up to them to encourage them to participate, one of them said mischievously, “If we start asking questions, the place will explode!” I challenged her to do so, and said that I was truly interested in hearing what she and the others had to say. Once they felt comfortable, they began to participate as well.

While we, as academics, are used to interacting with students in different parts of the world, we were impressed by the relevance of their questions and comments, their level of awareness and their intellectual maturity.

Day after day, the gymnasium became a harmonious place where the meeting of minds and intellectual interaction occurred. For those few hours per day, they were not refugees in need of assistance; they were engaged citizens as they would have liked to be inside Syria.

What we were bringing to them was only a sliver of what regular higher education could provide. All, without exception, longed for an opportunity to study, but universities in Jordan are too expensive and only a handful receives scholarships.

Others dream of leaving. Ziad, who had studied information technology for five years, was restless and talked about leaving for Europe through illegal channels. I tried to convince him to at least try the legal route and apply for a visa. He politely dismissed my advice. How could he envisage applying when his permission to leave the camp is restricted, when the camp is more than two hours from Amman where all the consulates are and where he would

have to go several times and present all sorts of papers he didn't have? I had no further advice to give.

What we had to offer them was very modest, what they were giving us in return was more rewarding than anything we could have expected. We promised to come back. We must do so, as soon as possible, before Ziad leaves on a potentially fatal boat crossing in the Mediterranean.

About the author

Bassma Kodmani is a co-founder of the Arab Reform Initiative where she has been the Executive Director since 2005.

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