DISPLACED

Stories from the Syrian Diaspora

Words by Majd Taby
Photos by Sara Kerens

Author's Note

Majd Taby

I grew up fascinated with the question of where my family came from. From a young age, I'd ask "Where did dad come from? And his dad? And his dad?" Yet despite my best efforts, those conversations never lasted very long. Partly because I annoyed my parents, but also because our family history gets very hazy before the 1880s. The Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Turks touched many other Christian communities in the region. It wiped our history clean. My grandfather and his sister who were alive at the time were orphaned and taken in by two Muslim families. He eventually rejoined the Christian community, but she never did and died a Kurd.

After the genocide, my grandparents moved to Eastern Syria where my parents grew up. My parents in turn moved west to Aleppo, where I grew up. At 15, I moved to the United States. For three generations, my family has fought to rebuild. My father and uncles worked tirelessly for four decades to break that cycle for us, but then the civil war started.

In those stories of rebuilding, I saw resilience. They became a point of pride for me. I heard tales of tragedy from the genocide, yet looked around at the accomplishments of my father and uncles, and I saw strength in the contrast. Today however, it's clear to me that the story was incomplete. Through the gloss of hindsight, I was looking at the accomplishments and missing the journey. I never felt what my grandmother felt in those years after the genocide. I never struggled like my father did.

Those histories were narrated to me like a movie montage — Individual snapshots of major events. The banality and failures in between those moments however, make up the heart of our identity. Having lived in three different cities myself, two of which I did not feel a strong sense of belonging to, and none of which I have deep roots in, it's been hard for me to learn about myself from the people and places around me. My family's stories became stand-ins, and the resilience and perseverance in them the defining characteristics I modeled my ambition after.

Those stories were never recorded, and that always bothered me. My one remaining grandparent, my mother's mother, is the only person in my family tree to have had a first-hand account of that phase of history. I long ago wanted to record her in her own words, to share with the future generations of my family. I wanted to do the same for my father and uncles. I wanted to capture the story of the family business as they built it from a shack to an international business. The stories were hopeful and triumphant.

Capturing these stories became a long-running idea in the back of my head, always de-prioritized behind the seemingly more pressing minutiae of daily life. Then August 2015 happened, and the refugee crisis in Europe was thrust onto the world stage. I watched the crisis unfold from San Francisco mystified, unable to focus on any task at hand, unable to feel present and aware.

It seemed to me that the same motivation I had for recording these stories of my family applied to the people streaming into Europe. This migration is a profound moment in our history and if I, as a Syrian-American, armed with technical, photographic, and linguistic abilities don't capture it, who will? I talked to my friend Sara in New York City about the project, and a few weeks later, our Kickstarter project launched.

The support from our friends and family has been incredible. We were able to reach our goal well within the deadline we set for ourselves, and with that money, booked our flights to Izmir in Turkey, unsure of what the first step would be. In hindsight, some preliminary work would have helped, but we didn't feel like we had that privilege. The project had an element of urgency. Events on the ground were

shifting from day to day as the European authorities reacted to the shock of drownings in the Aegean and crowds at their borders. September saw a record number of migrants landing in Greece and we were worried we already missed the boat. Then October broke another record. November next, with fear that the winter winds make the Aegean impassable. We had a small window to operate in.

The media was focused on the macro events of the conflict, dehumanizing the individual stories behind the people on the boats. Who are these people? Why are they coming here? Why now?

The Syrian identity, steeped in ancient history, was being redefined by pictures of suffering and rubble. The term "Refugee" became associated with "Syrian." I saw a disconnect between my Syrian reality and the one emerging in Western media. This book is an effort to bridge that gap.

Photographer's Note

Sara Kerens

A mutual friend introduced me to Majd while I was on a short project in San Francisco, saying, "I think you guys will collaborate on a project at some point." He could not have been more right. Only a couple months after meeting, Majd and I were flying to Turkey for the Displaced book project.

I was learning more about what was happening in Syria through Majd, and the more I heard and the more we discussed, the project seemed to take shape. Then the little boy was found on the shore of the beach and there was a media explosion. It was overwhelming and news agencies seemed to be doing what they do best—sensationalizing and polarizing the horror. The American media was showing numbers and statistics, rather than human stories. That was the switch that had to be made. These were real lives, not droves of people trying to siphon off the system. They were fleeing terror in a country torn apart by war.

I liked the partnership that the project would be: A Syrian-American writing and interpreting, and me, an outsider, observing and capturing each person we interviewed, showing how their journey and life had taken them out of their homeland. I wanted to see things first hand and make up my own mind.

I also desired to be challenged in craft and in thought. I wanted to place myself in the thick of it and be changed by those I met and by their stories that they shared. Skeptical of the refugees escaping to Europe instead of staying in Turkey, I returned to New York three months later with a deeper understanding and a new perspective on immigration, borders and the American Dream. I am glad for that change, despite it being difficult for some of my friends and family to understand.

There were two moments that had significant impact on me. The first day, we were on the beach in Skala Sikamineas, Greece to assess what was happening and logistically get a sense of how the rafts were coming in, how the volunteers handled things, how the camp ran to ensure the safety of the many men, women and children. As we walked up, a raft came to shore. I started photographing the scene— everything happened so fast. The divers swam out to pull the raft in safely. I kept shooting. The volunteers removed the children first, then elderly, and finally everyone else.

One of the volunteers was holding a little boy around two years old, and she was needed across the way. She looked around to hand off the child, and I was the only one there. It's a difficult line sometimes between being present and observing through my lens. I stopped shooting and raised my arms out and told her to go. She handed him over. I was holding this little boy that had no idea what was happening. He was quiet. His large, brown eyes looking right at me. He hadn't been changed and smelled of urine and his hair needed to be brushed. He was wearing a tiny life jacket. He never cried. I held him tight and wrapped a mylar blanket around him. I was upset inside. The chatter from news stories in the U.S. and people's fears about helping "these people" was pin balling in my head and here I was, holding a refugee in my arms. A real person, not just a story. I stood there holding him for only a few minutes before a nurse came over.

The second moment was also on the beach in Skala. Another raft had landed after some intense rain. This little girl in a pink hat was carried off the boat. I kept photographing the landing and people walking up to the road, and I kept getting drawn to that little girl. She was with her dad and a couple other men. They stood on the road talking. The little girl tucked close to her father, both her hands around his wrist, and his hand on her shoulder. More photos. Majd and I walked down the road to the base camp with everyone. They needed more help with handing out cups of soup. This would be the only food available

until arriving at the official camp, a two-mile walk on a mountain road. We lost track of her once we got to the food tent.

Majd and I left the next day to catch a ferry to Athens. After taking a walk on the upper deck, we decided to start going through the ferry and seeing who would talk to us and who would share their stories. As we walked into the stairwell, the little girl with the pink hat was walking with her dad to go out onto the deck. We ended up chatting for a long time and getting introduced to a few family members that were with them. This little four-year-old was going on a journey she would never forget. We met up with them in Vienna, too. Money and nationality determined the fate of a lot of people within Europe. As of today, I don't know if she is safe. I can only hope she is.

What happens to a population that loses its place in the world? Generations of Syrians no longer have a territory and borders to call their own. What happens when that population now resides amongst other civilizations that have opposing world views, religion and culture? There is a severe impact on not resolving the situation in Syria. Many of its citizens live in neighboring countries or in Western Europe. What happens to the culture of Western Europe as this problem festers?

There is a lot to think through. The intent behind this project is to open those doors of discussion. We must consider the ramifications of the crisis both abroad and at home. The United States has a growing anti-immigrant voice that wants to close "our America" to the world. It's important to recognize our moral obligation towards those in need. Similarly, there is an impact to high volume immigration on our society. Both have consequences that must be considered.

Fundamentally, humans desire similar things in life. That is what I saw through meeting so many people across Turkey and Europe. Everyone had the same answer. "I want to be safe. I want to have a family and do something meaningful with my work." Sounds pretty similar to what all my American friends want in life. That should resonate with us.


NORWAY
SWEDEN
THE NETHERLANDS
GERMANY
AUSTRIA
SLOVENIA
GREECE
TURKEY
SYRIA

Introduction

With the war entering its sixth year, a 19-year-old Syrian has spent their entire teen years in a state of arrested development. Depending on the province they live in, the course of their life and their experiences in it are defined by the fighting. Those in the east now live under the black banner of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Those in the northwest are now rebels. Those in the northeast are participants in the Kurdistan experiment.

Education interrupted, work evaporating, and the currency imploding, the war risks destroying the hopes, dreams, and ambitions of generations of Syrians. Stepping outside risks sniper fire, ransom kidnappings, or mortar showers. Staying indoors risks the car bombs and barrel bombs. Aleppo is now the most dangerous city in the world.

The lack of embassies and international visa availability further limits options for those who decide to leave. A young Syrian, fresh out of college with a degree under their belt, stares death on a daily basis yet has nowhere to go legally. Life in nearby refugee camps is destitute and hopeless. To thrive and have a shot at a normal life, they have to look farther.

By 2013, those with resources began securing fake passports to Europe. The brave but less resourceful opted for the very dangerous seas. Walking through a hostile European Union to reach Germany by foot, they resorted to extreme measures. They packed into unventilated trucks driven by smugglers and walked through forests to cross a border. Despite the danger, their numbers kept swelling until in 2015 one of those trucks made headlines. While investigating an abandoned truck on the highway, authorities in Austria found over 70 bodies packed in the back, mostly Syrian. More photos of death followed, and with them, outrage at the inaction grew.

In August 2015 Chancellor Angela Merkel decided not to turn back refugees arriving in Germany. Word quickly spread of the news, and Germany was on everybody's lips. In 2013, the cost and the physical burden of the trip was prohibitive for most people. The dinghy ride from Turkey to Greece alone cost up to 3,000 euros per person. With Merkel's decision however, a surge in demand caused the prices to plummet. The dinghy ride cost as little as 900 euros by October 2015.

The Red Cross and the UNHCR in collaboration with other international and local aid agencies began streamlining the journey, working with local authorities to allow the migrants use of trains. By October, a refugee landing in Turkey from Syria could find themselves on a boat just hours later, and in Oslo 5 days later having spent about 1,200 euros total. More and more Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans began viewing the trip as the only alternative to their dire situation. Smugglers became well known and the trip was well documented. The journey was demystified, eroding the barrier of fear around it. By the conclusion of 2015, more than one million refugees had sought asylum in Europe.

Their stories and the lives they look forward to are the subject of this book. These photographs and stories are based on a ten week trip through Europe at the end of 2015 when the refugee crisis peaked.

International media has already documented the journey and the crisis with a macro lens. What we hope to do instead is to shine a light on the individuals behind the story and their struggle to rebuild and move forward with their lives.


POLICE

Skala Sikamineas

Lesbos, Greece

Five miles south of Turkey's coast lies the Greek village of Skala Sikamineas. This fishing village has always been a destination for European and Turkish tourists looking for a good meal and a picturesque evening.

Yet under the radar of international media, the fishermen have shared their waters with clandestine visitors. For decades, boats of refugees have been arriving on the shores of Skala Sikamineas. Once or twice a month, an inflatable dinghy would land on the beach near the harbor. Its occupants would disembark and walk to the village square. Back then, they could grab a meal at the restaurant or book a room for the night in the hotel.

Since the Syrian Civil War started however, the boats have transformed life in this tiny village of 150 people. The privileges and comforts of yesteryear's refugees are no longer afforded to the refugees of 2015. Now they arrive by the thousands every day. They start coming by dawn and don't slow down until nightfall. Tourism all but ceased, taking down with it the bloodline of Skala's economy.

No two boat rides are exactly the same. For some, the ride is easy and almost enjoyable. For others, it was a brush with death. Here, fragments from dozens of interviews and stories are strung together, to provide a synthesized account of what an average day during the height of the refugee crisis looked like to those who lived through it.

The Passengers

Out of the van and reunited with their bags, the refugees carry the large, heavy boxes containing the dinghy from the highway out to the shore. They unpack and assemble and inflate it. They put it in the water, then they file into it. The boat isn't designed for the number of people climbing in, and they all feel the water creeping up the edge of the boat as it weighs down. They tried arguing with the smuggler about the number of people, but he has a gun and they don't have much of an option. The first person to board is the driver manning the rudder. Next the men sit on the sides shoulder-to-shoulder grabbing the rope for balance. The suitcases line the floor and on them, the elderly, women, and children sit back-to-back, knees bent to make space. Everybody knows the driver gets to ride for free and they're harboring some jealousy about it, but who wants to shoulder the responsibility of 60 lives on their hands? With everybody loaded in, the smuggler turns to the driver and points to the distant mountain of Lesbos and tells him to go there.

The Driver

He can barely see ahead through the backs of his passengers as he steers the boat and revs the engine. The winds are picking up now. He's trying to put on a good show, nobody knows that he's sitting in a dinghy for the first time. The boat crests a wave with a little too much speed and takes on water on the downswing. With the first wave, the wails of the women and children begin. Some are praying. The boat is heavy and the water is cold. With the weight they have on, the boat is much deeper than it should be. The men on the side must hold still or risk tipping. They start talking to each other for the first time as a group without a smuggler among them. One of the men has cell reception and the number of the Greek Coast Guard that'll come in handy in an emergency. They're scared of using it. They've heard stories of boats being sent back by the coast guard.

Halfway to Lesbos, the engine sputters then shuts off. He tries to start it again but it won't start. They don't want to call for help yet, they're too close to Turkey and they're afraid of being sent back. The current slowly carries them back. The driver, in a panic tries starting the engine again a few times. Finally, it catches and starts and they get moving forward again. One of the men is sleeping on his neighbor's shoulder. The neighbor doesn't wake him up and the sleeping man is none the wiser.

An hour into the ride their legs go numb and no longer hurt from the pressure they're under. There's too much happening at this point to question where they are or why they put themselves in this position. The time for questions will come later.

It's been almost an hour and it starts raining. Everybody's shivering and wet. The boat is taking on water with every wave. Some of the men use their shoes and bottles to scoop water out. They've heard stories of people throwing luggage off the boat to save weight. Hopefully they won't need to do that. One woman threw up in sea sickness and a few others followed suit. The women and the children won't stop crying. The beach is getting closer now. They're close enough to make out a man on the beach waving something bright and orange on the shore. Maybe there's help there. The driver turns the rudder and angles the boat toward the man on the shore.

The Volunteers

The Adventist church has set up a field hospital in a bus parked on the shore. They offer much needed support for children, pregnant women, and people with medical emergencies. They also established a relationship with the local hospital to provide an ambulance if needed. A Malaysian cook has set up a field kitchen to provide some soup and tea for the cold and hungry refugees. Along with a small army of local and international

volunteers, they all wait for the next boat to come. They don't usually have to wait for very long. They have learned how to scan the horizon for boats. They can see Turkey in the distance on a clear day, and from the mountaintop they can survey the entire coast for small black dots that mark the incoming dinghies. They set up a group chat to coordinate among the aid groups.

Despite the fact that the northern shore of Lesbos is one of the busiest in the crisis, the official and large NGOs don't go near the water. It's left to this ragtag team of Greek and international volunteers to survey the waters and help on the frontline making sure people aren't lost or worse, drowned.

Among the volunteers, solidarity is built on the first day of their arrival and their goodbyes are tearful. A tribe is formed in that small village, with members joining and leaving as their schedules allow. They are united through a sense of purpose and pride.

The Lifeguard

A boat is approaching. The message goes out to the volunteers on the shared group chat and cell phones ring in the cafes and restaurants of the village. They quickly leave and run out. There are always volunteers on the shore, but each boat could have an emergency situation. The beach is littered with bright orange life vests from previous landings. One of the volunteers on the beach sees the incoming boat, picks up one of the life jackets, and waves it at the boat. The boat turns slightly towards the life vest and approaches. Its approach comes at an angle. They need to get the driver to land straight on — It's the safest way for them to disembark so the boat doesn't flip over and throw the people into the water.

"SAWI! SAWI! SHWAY SHWAY!" (Straight! straight! Slowly!) the volunteer yells in broken Arabic once the boat is within earshot.

The boat turns and comes in straight on. A few volunteers are in the water already. They grab a hold of the rope on the side of the boat to steady it and keep the men on the edges from jumping off. If they did, they'd easily throw off the balance and tip the boat over. The volunteers have developed a system to avoid such problems: Children, then the elderly, then women, then men. Always in that order, always from the front. A woman holds out her child to the volunteer then tries to stand up but can't. She's been crushed under bodies and legs for two hours and she can't support herself anymore. Another volunteer comes and helps her off. She hasn't broken eye contact with her child. She calls out and the volunteer brings the child to her. "Are we in Greece?" She asks the volunteer through the shake in her lips.

They're safe on the beaches of Greece. The dangerous part is over, but the journey is just starting. Storm clouds are gathering. The forecast shows heavy rainfall for four days, but they don't know that.

The Locals

The restaurant sits nearly empty. Half eaten meals and cups of tea litter the tables. One of the groups got word that a boat was coming and rushed out to help. The other groups nearby quickly followed. What had been a bustling place lively with stories, conversations, and laughs is now ominously quiet. The locals looked up at the volunteers as they left, but stayed behind. They've seen this happen before. They don't go to watch the boats come in anymore. Their contribution is to provide support for the volunteers.

Vangellis isn't worried about the unsettled bills in his restaurant; the volunteers that had been passing the time there will be back soon. Besides, there are only three cafes and two restaurants in the village, and everybody knows everybody. He stands outside for a moment, then turns around and shuffles back. He gets to work installing a new hydraulic hinge on the terrace's winter enclosure. It's getting cold and the forecast shows heavy rainfall.









WANTED
STOP


YAMAHA


Adventist
Help