



ZAATARI STORIES

No strangers to headlines, the denizens of the Zaatari Syrian refugee camp fight dust, boredom, and unwanted celebrity

Words by Mat Wolf • Photography by Omar Alkalouti

A man stares out through a camp fence. Not quite a square kilometer, the Zaatari camp is surrounded on three sides by desert.

Are you married?" the man asks after inviting me into his tent for a cup of tea. He gets his answer and asks why not, but quickly concludes, "You need a shave," while making a swipe across his neck. "I'm a barber. Let me cut you."

Ayman is a broad-shouldered, stocky man in his late fifties. He covers his bald head with a baseball cap and, despite his profession, wears a less-than-impeccably shaved graying mustache and beard. He insists the only thing separating a lad from a life of bachelordom and one of marital bliss is a handsome trim.

In the month or so since Ayman fled to Jordan, he and his business partner, Khalid, have made a comfortable living as the go-to scissor men in the Zaatari refugee camp. (For their and their families' protection, we have withheld their last names.) Khalid is slightly skinnier and younger than Ayman, his beard well-trimmed and still dark black. As Ayman shows off his razors, Khalid unpockets an inch-thick wad of Syrian and Jordanian currency and shuffles through it like a deck of cards. He tosses it on the foam mattresses that make up the floor of the duo's tent barbershop and goes over their price scheme: a dinar for a child's haircut and two for an adult's, while beard trims are also just a dinar.

Both men were barbers near Daraa, just across the border, but then President Bashar Al Assad's army came in. They say their livelihoods were destroyed, and they were forced to flee. Khalid brags slightly that he has two wives and five children, but is vague as to whether all made it out of Syria. Ayman provides fewer details about his own family, but laments he left his wife behind. Family isn't a topic he's chatty about, and he moves the conversation back to the beard trim I need if I ever want a wife. The blades are ready and he's brought out the clear, odorless jelly that will serve as his shaving lubricant.

With large, gnarled hands he grasps my chin and throat like he's examining a melon, and lathers on the lube, inserts a new razor, and begins sculpting. There are no barber chairs here and even if there were, the tent wouldn't be tall enough to accommodate them. Everyone sits cross-legged. There's little light in the tent, so Ayman moves in close. He begins the shave, first on my throat, then above my cheekbones, finally the hairline on the back of my neck.

I now bear the kind of perfectly trimmed beard normally reserved for Lebanese pop stars. The barbers are in a generous mood today, and insist this one's on the house. Jokingly, and possibly rehearsed, Ayman and Khalid insist they'd love to give Assad a shave as well. Ayman holds the razor in one hand, and makes a slitting motion across his throat with the other.

Three sides of Zaatari camp face Mafraq Governorate's open desert. On the fourth side sits an olive grove, its drab green lending slight contrast to the monotony of the surrounding brown. Enclosed by barbed wire and a chain-link fence, the camp at times takes on a prison-like visage. Gendarmes and Army patrols circle the perimeter in machine gun-mounted pickups and after a series of riots, that perimeter has expanded. A front entrance that consisted only of a turnpike has become a full-on metal gate with multiple checkpoints leading up the road to the main entrance. The original setup also had gun trucks, but these now have armored vehicle reinforcements.

Inside, the camp contains rows of dusty tents in varied unkempt states, some lashed together with tarp and extra rope to make compounds of a sort. The camp originally housed around ten thousand refugees, but according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees held more than three times that amount by the end of September. According to the UN Children's Fund, half of them are under eighteen. When I first visited Zaatari in August, about a month after it opened, many of the residents were angry that conditions weren't what they had expected and said the camp lacked basic necessities, especially in electricity, sanitation, and gender-specific outhouses. The camp has grown since then, both in population and infrastructure. Communal cinderblock kitchens, bathrooms, and water stations have been established. Some electricity is now available and public lighting has increased. A program to upgrade the tents to trailers has started, but most still use the canvas shelters.

On that outing, only a handful of charities and aid organizations kept a high profile. The Moroccan and French militaries operated field hospitals, and a German charity had a facility. The Saudis too had a presence, since upgraded to a series of trailers emblazoned with their green flag and heraldry. That was about it aside from the United Nations and Jordanian military and police.

Now the camp is a cause célèbre, and there's a rainbow of government and non-government agencies with on-site detachments. A Danish government delegation visits when I return in early September, and two days later Angelina Jolie arrives with a government entourage. Photo ops abound, but the first Syrian I speak to has become tired of the attention. She is a small, older woman wearing an *abaya* and grasping a young girl to her side. She tells me I should leave.

"Why did you come? There's no benefit to being here," she says, "nothing beneficial." She shuffles away in silence. Her life and tragedy have become such a public spectacle she doesn't need windows added to her world, but she doesn't speak for everyone.

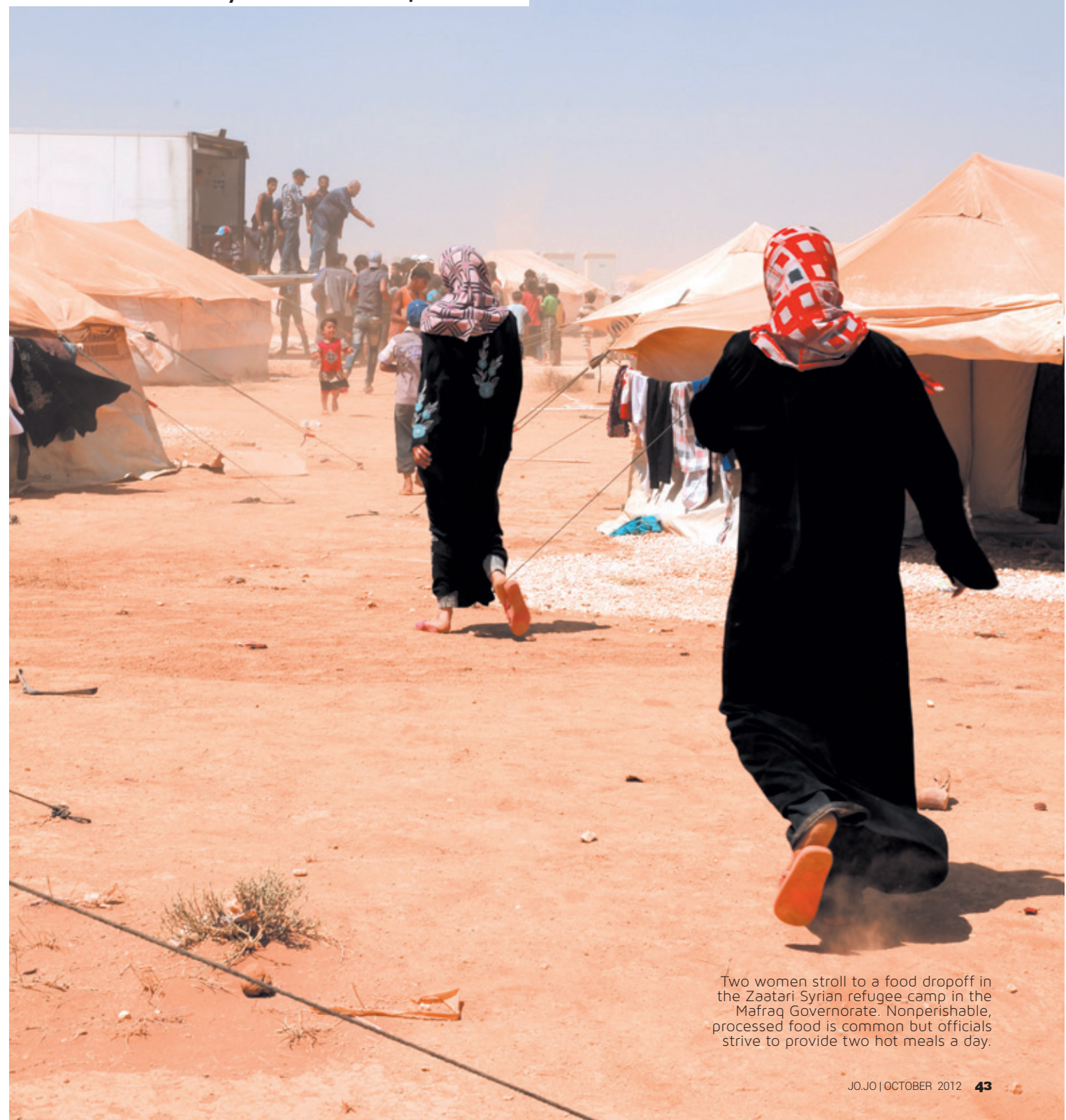
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Two women stroll to a food dropoff in the Zaatari Syrian refugee camp in the Mafraq Governorate. Nonperishable, processed food is common but officials strive to provide two hot meals a day.



Wind whips through the browned UNHCR tents at Zaatari. Because of its location on flat and unpacked desert, dust devils are common.

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The camp can be a dreary, uneventful place that leaves its residents plenty of time for introspection about why they're here, what they left behind, and a lot of what-ifs about alternate histories. People watching and re-watching home videos on their mobile phones has become a pastime of last resort. Some show weddings or pictures of their families, but even more watch footage of the war left behind—almost as if they didn't want to forget. Even if they could, the bombs and guns can make for macabre entertainment on a dull Zaatari day. This is how I first meet Adnan.

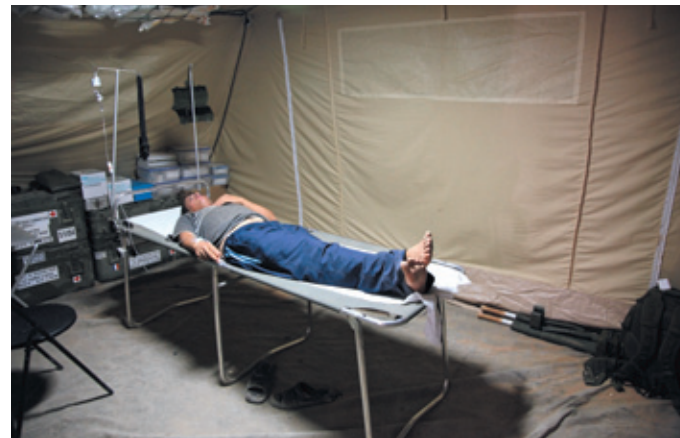
The compound tent Adnan shares with his wife, brothers, and extended family stands out from most of its neighbors because of its residents' commitment to exterior

design. It's common for larger families to throw a tarp or fabric over two facing tents to create an open dining room or courtyard, but this family has cut triangular windows into foam mattresses and walled in their courtyard—their tent is now their castle. Despite these fortifications they're a friendly bunch quick to invite new acquaintances for tea and cigarettes. They huddle over a stove that's been constructed of two cinder blocks and a few tent stakes, using *argileh* coals for fuel—a standard jury-rigged model found throughout the camp.

Adnan is quiet, but speaks perfect English from the time he spent working at an embassy in Damascus. Most recently, he had taken up farming in Daraa, as jobs in Syria were scarce even before the fighting. Adnan and his



Above, left: A teenager shows burns on his legs he says are the result of torture in a Syrian prison. Above, right: A crowd gathers to celebrate a wedding held at the camp. Left: A man injured from fighting inside Syria waits for medical care at a French military field hospital.



family fled Daraa in late August after an army offensive. He makes small talk for a while but insists he would rather not speak about the war, but show it. One of his tent-mates, Ahmed, whips out an older Nokia, and pulls up an audio file. There's a moment of quiet, followed by a high-pitched, eerie whine. The whine turns into a metallic scream, and the scream climaxes in a roaring explosion. Ahmed says the audio is of a missile that had been fired by government aircraft. The explosion at the end is the missile hitting his home moments after he escaped.

Not to be outdone, one of Ahmed's brothers takes out another phone—this one with video on it. If the stories

they tell are true, this handset's had quite a journey: Adnan claims it belonged to a regime soldier who was killed, then a Free Syrian Army fighter swiped the phone off his corpse and sold it to one of the brothers before they left for Jordan. Though elements of the story are outlandish, the device is loaded with images and video of Assad's forces celebrating apparent victory in Daraa. Occasionally Adnan's family plays *dabke* tunes, but they keep bringing back the videos. The phones are passed around and exchanged like trading cards.

In addition to providing a little shade, the tents keep in the smoke and a haze has settled. The more the brothers talk, the more they smoke. Hearing the commotion, an unnamed neighbor swings by and makes light conversation. He asks Adnan if he's coming to tonight's wedding. Adnan indicates he is, and quickly turns around to let everyone know about the event. This isn't an everyday camp occurrence, and for friends and family it will be a time of celebration in the midst of hardship. For the casual hangers-on who barely know the families,



Crowds surge to collect nonperishable food from a delivery truck. The vehicle operators shut its doors and threatened to drive off after the crowd became unruly.

the party might be a reprieve from sitting and smoking all day. I ask to meet the couple.

The bride has largely stayed in seclusion, but it's not hard to pick out the groom, Huthaifa, or his father, Abu Yusef, who's sitting in his patio receiving well-wishers. Abu Yusef is a tall, skinny man with salt-and-pepper hair and wears a dress shirt. His twenty-three-year-old son is still hanging out in shorts and a bright yellow T-shirt about four hours before the wedding. I tell them I'll return.

In one of Zaatari's newer neighborhoods, a few hundred recently added UNHCR tents stand ready to take in new arrivals. Unlike the tent compounds, these tents have very little customization, and don't bear the collected dirt of two months in the open desert. The fine sand hasn't been trampled and nearby bulldozers kick up plumes as they break ground on new facilities. A group of young men spot me wandering through and invite me inside.

The new tents are taller and have room to stand comfortably. This particular tent houses around ten men, most in their teens and twenties. They've invited me in to show off their friend Thamer, recovering from a surgery at the Moroccan military hospital. He lies on the floor, sedated and speaking in short, incoherent mumbles. He waves a quick victory sign. Thamer is their champion, and is more popular than ever because he snagged his X-rays. As he fades in and out of conversation, his friends are visibly giddy at the chance to show off the images.

There are X-rays from all over his body, but the young men focus on two. The first shows a bullet or piece of shrapnel wedged in his back, and the second shows the thick, opaque outline of a metal rod implanted in his right arm. After the X-ray exhibit, a murmur runs through the

crowd to see if anyone else has injuries worth showing. A tall man, twenty-five-year-old Ihab, takes off his black shirt to reveal a series of mangled, fleshy burns all over his upper back. He says these are torture scars he received during a five-month stay in prison. Not to be outdone, another man, eighteen-year-old Abdurahman, jumps up and says he too has torture scars. He plops back down and rolls up his pant leg to reveal a pattern of coin-sized pink burn marks covering his legs. These scars are smaller and more precise than Ihab's, but more numerous. Abdurahman says he had only been in prison three months compared to Ihab, but in addition to burns, he's also excited to show that his fingernails had been pulled out, raising a hand and pulling with invisible pliers.

Ihab doesn't know why he was incarcerated and Abdurahman thinks his arrest was because he attended a protest. Family members paid off guards to get them out of prison, and fearing future arrests, they fled to Jordan. They say the cost to get out of prison varied, but was usually around 200,000 Syrian pounds—roughly JD 2,000.

For this group, the tent has become a frat house where potentially mortal wounds aren't commiserated but cheered. With plenty of processed food, no school, and no parental supervision, the youth here would almost be living a teenager's paradise if it wasn't located in the middle of a bleak, machine gun-guarded desert.

By now the wedding has begun and Huthaifa has reappeared wearing a pinstripe dress shirt and someone puts aviator shades on him. A large portion of the camp has come out for the celebration, and Huthaifa's male relatives and friends form a circle around him, stomping their feet, clapping their hands, and chanting congratulations to the groom and his family. The group hoists Huthaifa onto one man's shoulders and parades him inside the circle as he claps, waves, and gives the peace sign (or it could be the V for victory). He's then handed off to another man and another after that, his feet never touching the ground. There's at least one TV crew out, and countless photographers—the event has become a media circus. Every lens is on the groom, but the bride still hasn't appeared. Women stand guard outside her tent, allowing no one to approach. The groom's dance circle goes on for half an hour, and Huthaifa looks exhausted. The circle then marches to different locations around the camp.

Camp security shows up to kick out the press. A splinter of the wedding party breaks off to chant slogans at the front gate—whatever happens tonight, the guards don't want cameras here. My day at Zaatari is over, but for the people who live here, life goes on. As the war next door continues, the influx of new Zaatari neighbors shows no sign of ending either despite the closed border.

Though conditions in the camp have improved, and residents do their best to maintain their spirits, for many this is a detention. As they wait here, interminably, a bitter reality festers in the minds of many Zaatari residents: They traded away their homes, businesses, and ways of life for security, peace of mind, and monotonous tedium. ■

A young girl carries a child across the camp. More than half of all Zaatari residents are under eighteen years old, according to UNICEF, and UNHCR data indicates sixteen babies had been born there as of late September.



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