

# Yet Another Migration



By Khaled Jarrar

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had a homework assignment to do, so I brought my books along,” Nadira Aboud says, going back to a faraway time and place, remembering her family’s displacement from Nazareth in 1948. The family crossed into Syria and waited to return. Nadira’s mother kept telling her how sure she was that she would return to her school soon; so sure in fact that, while waiting, Nadira’s parents didn’t bother to enroll her in another school. They found shelter in Yarmouk Refugee Camp. Nadira put her schoolbooks in a box and, watching years pass by, the family held on to the key to their home in Nazareth – while building a concrete hut to keep out the cold.

“It was a big house,” Nadira laments, remembering the home in Nazareth and making sweeping gestures to illustrate a two-story home

made of stone. Her eyes momentarily sparkle at the memory and go dim again, finding their way back to the reality of the camp. By the 1960s, she was married and Yarmouk had gone from a dingy refugee camp to a bustling neighborhood housing thousands of Palestinian refugees. It was a miserable existence. But when the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, Nadira and her family were forced to experience yet a new kind of misery.

The war crept into the camp slowly, but by December 2012, it was in full swing. There were daily bombardments and everyone was affected. When a rocket hit a neighbor’s home, Nadira’s husband was seriously wounded by shrapnel and immediately taken to a hospital in Damascus. When after partial treatment they wanted to return to Yarmouk, this turned out to be impossible: All the roads were closed. “We had nothing at all,” Nadira says, “no money, nothing!” Stranded, they tried their luck in El Hami City, but, as she puts it, “Wherever we’d go, the bombing would follow us.”

Knowing that they could not live in such destitution and with her husband still wounded, they made their way to Turkey, once again hoping to wait out displacement until they could find their way back to the place they had called home for over sixty years. But sadly, Nadira’s husband succumbed to his wounds in Istanbul and died – in a foreign hospital, rather than in his homeland as they had imagined all these decades. Moreover, Turkey offered no future to the family either, and thus, in September 2014, with no end of the war in sight, Nadira and her family made the decision to join the tens of thousands of refugees heading towards Western Europe. “We had no official papers, no residency, no future, nothing,” Mona, Nadira’s daughter, remembers. They were nevertheless hopeful that “if we made it to a European country, we’d get official papers and even citizenship.”

When I met Nadira Aboud and her family on Mytilene Island, Greece, Nadira had already crossed the Aegean Sea. They were in a huge crowd, headed to catch a ferryboat to Athens, to join the nearly one million refugees and migrants who were trying to make their way to Europe. I accompanied them as they traveled by foot, taking turns pushing Nadira’s wheelchair, through Greece and the Balkans, all the way to their final destination, Germany. She held travel documents issued by the Syrian government – the closest thing she’s ever had to a passport or citizenship. “We have no house, no nation. Where should we go? Wherever we go, war follows us,” Nadira said as we walked along the refugee route. “We’ve heard good things about Germany.”

For 24 days, I lived with them in a refugee camp in Wesel, Germany, and was obliged to leave only because the German authorities asked me to sign asylum-application documents. “How lucky I am,” I thought, “to have a place to which I can return while Nadira can only dream of visiting Palestine, her homeland.” After I left them, the family lived in a small, shared room in Germany and was hoping to move to a slightly larger apartment. Although Nadira tells me she’s happy, she often thinks about Nazareth and their large, two-story stone house, remembering a time and place that felt safe, where and when war was a far-away darkness found only in stories and nightmares.

But for the Aboud family, Germany means much more than just safety. Nadira has been a refugee for almost seventy years now, and her children were born refugees. Germany holds a cross-generational family of refugees and stateless individuals, giving them their first chance to be something other than refugees – to become full citizens of a state.

*Khaled Jarrar is a multidisciplinary artist who explores modern power struggles and their sociocultural impact on ordinary citizens.*

