

الزعتري

Za'atari: Through the Lens



FILM DETAILS

TITLE

Za'atari Through the Lens (working title)

LENGTH

Feature (~70 min)

GENRE

Documentary

LANGUAGE

Arabic

COUNTRY

USA, Jordan

RELEASE YEAR

2019

LOGLINE

Three Syrian teenagers use the art of photography to cope with the pain and personal loss of war, and to tell stories of humanity and hope in the world's largest Syrian refugee camp.

TOPIC SUMMARY

In the middle of the Jordanian desert sits the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world. It is called Za'atari, and from the air it looks like an island of white huts in the middle of an ocean of sand. Over 80,000 men, women and children who have escaped horror and war in Syria since 2012 now have no choice but to call Za'atari home. Operated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), this massive camp is now overflowing with displaced people, struggling to survive and navigate a very unstable situation with an uncertain future. As a host country, Jordan has made a tremendous effort in providing for refugees, yet there are still many challenges to overcome in camps like Za'atari. Water can be scarce. Black markets have sprung up to provide for both necessity and vice. Human traffickers and opportunists prey on the desperate. Frustrations and generations-old religious tensions sometimes boil over into violence.



In the five years since Za'atari opened, it has morphed from a makeshift camp to a bustling city of refugees. More than fifty percent of those living in Za'atari are age 5 to 18 and resources to help these children are scarce. As with all refugee camps, limited access to education and mental health facilities are serious concerns. Aid workers who help refugee children warn that the biggest dangers for stateless youth are a loss of identity and motivation, and overwhelming feelings of hopelessness. Without education and positive direction, an already uncertain future becomes significantly more perilous, and the risks of being forced into early marriage, falling victim to human trafficking, child labor, or being courted by extremist groups makes life in refugee camps particularly dangerous for young people. With over 28 million child refugees worldwide, it is more essential and urgent than ever that we find and highlight ways to safeguard these children from danger and ensure they are given an opportunity for a productive and safe future.

STORY SUMMARY

Mohamad Khalaf has lived in Za'atari for six years. He was among the earliest wave of refugees to move into the camp, having fled his home near Damascus after his brother was killed during a missile strike on their neighborhood. Along with his wife, Mohamad has done everything he can to make Za'atari feel as much like home as possible. Living in the camp, Mohamad witnessed how the depression and boredom of the children and teenagers was starting to lead to violence and crime. In an effort to help the kids in the camp, Mohamad turned to his own budding passion for photography.



Before the war, Mohamad had worked as a janitor in a photography studio in Damascus. Though he was not permitted to touch any of the camera equipment, he still fell in love with photography, and listened carefully to the conversations between his bosses in order to learn all he could about taking photographs. Photography helped Mohamad cope with the depression and aimlessness he felt during his early months in the camp, and he believed that it could do the same for the children he

saw struggling all around him. He has now taught photography to more than 100 children in the camp, and has become a mentor to dozens of young people.

Mohamad is working with three young men who have, under his tutelage, fallen in love with photography. Mohamad knows that the three boys—now on the brink of adulthood—are at a precarious age: their education and professional dreams have been derailed and as their stay in the camp goes on and on with no end in sight, their anxiety over the future is nearly crippling. Further, the boys feel that they are misunderstood and misrepresented by the outside world. As an answer to the boys' collective frustration, Mohamad assigns them a photo project, which he titles *I am Syrian*. Their assignment: to capture the beauty, ingenuity, dignity, and resilience of the Syrian people throughout the camp.

Seeing the world through a camera has changed **Qassem's** (19) life, creating an avenue through which he learned to empathize with others and to realize that he wasn't the only person going through a painful time. Whereas when he first arrived at Za'atari, he viewed everyone around him with anger, under Mohamad's wing that anger has turned to compassion. Qassem especially enjoys taking photographs of the oldest citizens in the camp, and of sitting with them to hear stories of Syria. He has also befriended Farah, a six year old Syrian girl who has become a bit of a local celebrity because of her ability to inspire large crowds through her recitation of traditional Syrian poetry. Wise and confident well beyond her years, Farah speaks to large crowds about the strength and beauty of Syria, and about the need to allow girls to



go to school and to learn. Moved by her bravery, Qassem photographs Farah and her family in an effort to help spread her message. Qassem dreams of studying photojournalism full time at university, but for now he can only afford to take a basic English class twice a week. To help support his family, Qassem must work for hours every day at his uncle's store, which leaves him little time to practice photography. While he has grand ambitions and lots of talent, the realities of life in Za'atari are threatening to prevent Qassem from achieving his dreams.

Ali (18) misses the natural beauty of Syria, and uses macro-photography to artistically recreate the colorful nature that surrounded his home before the war—a fact that is virtually non-existent in the gray and brown bombed-out cityscapes that have come to be synonymous with the word “Syria.” As seen through Ali’s eyes, a single potted plant or flowering bush can become an abstract explosion of color, and it is these familiar patterns that remind Ali of home. Aside from his photography, Ali is also a star football player who before the war was on track to join the Syrian national team, just like his father had done years before. It has always been Ali’s goal to follow in his father’s footsteps and play professional football, but now he uses photography to cope with the reality that his childhood dream will never be realized.



For Yousef, photography is a way to share the realities of life in a refugee camp with the outside world. He bristles at being called a “refugee,” and of all the boys, he is most frustrated at the way the Syrian refugee crisis is portrayed in media around the world. Immensely proud of his Syrian heritage, Yousef spends days photographing small accomplishments and moments of joy around the camp. He profiles a local engineer who creates elaborate hand-welded bicycles and carts, a circus clown who helps wounded and disabled children cope through acting classes, and other such stories of ingenuity and strength around the camp. It is a constant struggle though, as Yousef is also the sole money earner for his eleven-person family. Yousef must choose between pursuing his dream of becoming a professional photographer and the immediate responsibilities of making money to feed his eight siblings.

Despite these personal challenges, Mohamad’s students are finding hope and opportunity in their new project. For Mohamad as well, life is becoming much more difficult. He’s forced to sell his camera in order to afford food and clothing for his newborn son, and paying work in the camp is becoming harder and harder to find. Even with these constant challenges, Mohamad commits himself to organizing a gallery show in the camp of Ali, Yousef, and Qassem’s photography projects. He wonders if he will ever get a chance to leave the camp and start over in a new country. For now, Mohamad is determined to remain positive, and believes that this photography exhibit will inspire the camp by showing the beauty and dignity of the Syrian people who, for now, call Za’atari home.

ARTISTIC APPROACH

This film is structured around Mohamad's efforts to teach photography to the children in Za'atari. We follow Ali, Yousef, and Qassem as they explore the camp and meet new people while working on their assignment capturing images that represent what it means to be Syrian. Their interwoven stories are told not just through interviews and verite scenes, but also through the images they capture. Through their unique perspectives, viewers get an unprecedented look into their world and their daily lives. This film will give names, faces, and voices to a few of the thousands of children living as refugees. In emotional interviews, they tell us about their hopes and dreams for the future of their country and themselves; their nostalgia for everything and everyone that they've lost in the war. Most importantly, they highlight the importance of rebuilding and believing that things can get better.



This film is shot in composed takes that juxtapose the expansive, sterile desert and the colorful, emotional, alive world that has been created within the confines of the camp. There is an intimacy to these stories, which is portrayed visually through emotional interviews with the four main characters and scenes of their daily lives. Moments like cooking dinner with their family or preparing to attend mosque are given significant weight,

to bring viewers into their lives and to spend proper time getting to know them as individual people, not just as characters serving a larger story. They are the story, and it is through their eyes and with their words that we explore the camp and feel what it is like to live as a refugee. The photos they take are also a significant aspect of the story, with detailed close-ups of faces and the beauty of the camp taking viewers into a level intimacy with the characters that even 4K video cannot achieve alone. By taking this approach, we feel their transformation more viscerally as they discover the power of their photography and develop an appreciation for the people around them.

PROJECT GOALS

Young Muslim men are overlooked by most films about the refugee experience, and we believe that it is important to give them a voice and a platform to tell their own stories and to be seen without stereotyping or bias. We also feel that it is important to show how crucial education and art are for the development and mental health of children and teenagers living in refugee camps. Za'atari is a success story in this regard thanks to the exemplary efforts of the Jordanian government and the UNHCR, who work hard to provide education and other programs that help give hope to the growing generation of Syrian children who call Za'atari home. By highlighting one small photography workshop that was started by a refugee, we show the positive lasting effects of such programs on children's lives. Through Yousef, Qassem and Ali, we see the life-changing impact that arts like photography can have on children, and why it is so crucial for all refugee children to have these opportunities. We are going to work with art galleries in New York City to host events featuring multi-media exhibits with photos from the "I am Syrian" photo project along with screenings of the film.



Our ultimate goal is to produce a film that reaches and moves audiences across the globe, regardless of nationality or religion. We have an international team of producers that intends to seek distribution and promote the film in the Middle East, Europe, Asia and the United States. Europe has recently expressed a need for films that show refugees in a positive light. As the world faces the biggest refugee crisis since WWII, it is essential that we promote tolerance and give positive attention to the 28 million refugee children that represent our future. By telling deeply human stories through powerful images and meaningful dialogue, this film will resonate with audiences of all ages across borders and cultures. This is a film about the human spirit, the power of being part of a community, and the importance of positive communication and finding your own voice. These themes are universal. Our goal is also to produce a film that can be shared with Syrian people around the world as part of their history and preservation of their identity and culture.

PRODUCTION TEAM



SUZANNE RICHIARDONE – Co-Director/Producer

Suzanne is an international documentary film and television producer. She has produced award-winning films and critically acclaimed programs for networks such as PBS, A&E, Animal Planet, ARTE France, WETV, Discovery International, and ABS CBN Philippines. Her projects include *Maravilla*, a feature length documentary about middleweight boxing champion Sergio Martinez, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2014, as well as *Beyond the Silence*, an investigative documentary about the rising tide of sexual violence on college campuses across America. Other projects have focused on NGOs in Africa and have included a series of short films for ActionAid International and The Gates Foundation about the empowering of women farmers. In 2016, she produced and co-directed the feature documentary *Curiosity, Adventure and Love*, which received five awards including a Special Jury Prize at the World Premieres Festival Philippines and Best Documentary at the Soho International Film Festival.



JUSTIN WEINRICH – Co-Director/Editor

Justin is a nonfiction filmmaker and journalist with nearly a decade of experience directing, writing, filming and editing nonfiction films. His work has aired on The National Geographic Channel, Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, and PBS, as well as theatrically worldwide. His projects include the Emmy nominated *Hard Time* series for National Geographic and the award winning *Animal Planet Investigates: Canned Hunting*. In 2015 Justin started Elephant Lake, a production company dedicated to exploring unique ethnographic, scientific, and environmental perspectives of our ever-evolving world through film. Elephant Lake's first feature film, *The Burning Field* – which will premiere in 2018 – explores the electronic waste crisis through the eyes of children who live and work in the world's largest e-waste dump in Ghana.

EDOARDO ROSSI – Producer



From his beginnings in the production industry, as a first assistant director in Europe and Latin America, Edoardo embraced a hands-on approach that has endeared him with the many international and local professionals that have worked alongside him over the years. Always raising the bar by adopting best practice methods, he has been able to train and also inspire local crews to increase their proficiency and develop their skills. At present, he covers the roles of Line Producer and Consultant with Cross Wind Advertising, a creative and specialist Production Service Network operating mainly in Latin America and the Mediterranean area. He is an accomplished Senior Executive and Incentives Advisor with established production success across film, animation, documentaries, TV and advertising industries as well as international Incentives & Logistics planning.



WIDAD SHAFAKOJ – *Producer*

Widad Shafakoj, a humanitarian, activist and filmmaker, has chosen film as a tool to relay her beliefs and concerns about society. Widad directed "ID: 000," an award-winning short documentary about the abuse and stigma faced by orphans in Jordanian society. The film made a significant impact on Jordanian regulations, leading to policy changes to protect and improve the social status of orphans. In 2013, Widad directed "The Last Passenger," a short documentary about Syrian refugees. In 2014, Widad was able to depict one of the topics closest to her heart. "If You Meant to Kill Me," her first feature documentary, addresses the controversial topic of women who are threatened by honor killings and voluntarily turn themselves into prison for protection. In 2017 Widad directed "17," a feature documentary supported and commissioned by HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein. The film is about the U-17 Jordanian female football team, featuring intimate portraits of young women aspiring to become great athletes. The team competed in the first ever World Cup to be held in the region. "17" premiered at El Gouna Festival in Egypt, and was selected to compete in the Tübingen Film Festival in Germany, the Arab Film Festival in San Francisco, and the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia.



JIMMY FERGUSON – *Cinematographer*

Jimmy is an award-winning filmmaker and cinematographer, specializing in projects around the world that explore themes such as sense of identity and human connectivity in our globalized society. He is a recent grant recipient of the Jerome Foundation, and was selected by EAVE in 2017. Jimmy has lensed over fifty films. The films he has photographed have premiered at prestigious festivals such as Mill Valley, Salento International, Newport Beach and Cannes. They have won numerous awards and grants such as Tiffany, Jerome, IFP and TFI. Jimmy's commercial work includes clients such as Canon, Samsung, L'Oréal, Maybelline, Redken, Rolling Stone, and Google. Jimmy is a member of the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective. His current feature, "Am I Don Quixote?" was featured in IFP's Spotlight on Documentaries and will premiere in 2018.



ADRIAN BELIC – *Camera*

Adrian Belic is an Academy Award nominated film director, cinematographer and producer. His work has been seen on National Geographic, History Channel, Discovery, PBS, BBC, Canel+, Arte, NHK, and Sundance Channel. His films have screened at film festivals and theatrically around the world. Adrian and his brother Roko's first feature documentary GENGHIS BLUES, filmed in the remote region of Central Asia called Tuva, won the Sundance Audience Award and was nominated for an Academy Award. Their second film, BEYOND THE CALL, a feature documentary filmed in war zones in the Middle East and Asia, premiered at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival and has screened around the world winning more than 50 film festival awards. The brothers' third feature documentary HAPPY, about the science and practice of happiness around the world, has become a global phenomenon.

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