

Children's Playground: Fostering Peace between Native and Refugee Communities

Country: Jordan

Princeton University

Wardah Bari '16, Farah Amjad '16, USA

In April of 2011, a group of anti-government protesters, inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, took to the streets in Syria to challenge the country's regime. The Syrian government responded by violently cracking down on protestors. Since 2012, this struggle between anti-government and government forces has escalated into a full-fledged civil war, creating a severe humanitarian crisis. With local neighborhoods turned into battlegrounds, those who can escape from the violence and gross human rights violations leave their homes and loved ones behind to find refuge in neighboring countries. Today, two million Syrians are now living as refugees. Jordan faces the greatest strains from a Syrian refugee population, which now makes up ten percent of Jordan's population. While Jordan is accustomed to large influxes of refugees, as Palestinian and Iraqi refugees have lived in the country for years, the increasing number of Syrian refugees, more than 550,000, has become a test for the country's resources and native population. These challenges are apparent in the changing dynamics of border cities, such as Mafraq.

Mafraq is a poor, developing city about ten miles away from the largest Syrian refugee camp, Zaatari. Before Zaatari was opened in 2012, most Syrian refugees fled to Mafraq. The influx of refugees to Mafraq drove up housing costs, increased competition in the employment market, crowded local schools, and more. The opening of Zaatari has decreased the number of refugees entering Mafraq, but the city's problems still exist, creating tensions between local Jordanians and Syrian refugees. While the Jordanians hold Syrian refugees responsible for the city's deteriorating conditions, Syrian refugees accuse Jordanians of turning away Syrian kids from local schools, harassment especially towards women, and many other forms of mistreatment. Tensions have escalated to the extent that both Syrian and Jordanian parents now discourage their children from playing together.

As most aid organizations allocate their resources to Zaatari, Mafraq continues to exist as a divided city. Our project aims to bring together the children of Syrian refugees and Jordanians in Mafraq as a way of easing the tensions between the two groups. By creating a "Children's Playground," we seek to engage Syrian and Jordanian children in peaceful mechanisms of dialogue, art, and education so they build understanding between each other that can foster peace outside of the playground that affects their homes and the streets of Mafraq. The first two components of our project, dialogue and artistic expression, will serve as therapeutic mechanisms for the children. Many Syrian refugee children suffer from depression or posttraumatic stress disorder because of their separation from relatives and homes and from the scenes of violence and death they have witnessed. With these memories, it is hard for Syrian refugee children to relate and interact with Jordanian children. Likewise, Jordanian children have difficulty relating to Syrian children who, because of the larger tensions in the city, are seen as the "other." In addition, Syrian children in Jordan are facing several identity struggles as they are now spending several years of their childhood in Jordan.

The platform of a Children's Playground allows the children to share their experiences and release their inner frustration and thoughts through peaceful and creative artistic expression, such as through writing, photography, and painting. We will focus on a group of about 25-30 children from the community. The Children's Playground will provide students with resources to further their own creative and artistic interests. By creating different focus groups among these children, we will provide them with the intimate space they need to have in order to feel comfortable enough to share their narratives with each other and through their creative expression. The creative work the children choose to produce will be compiled and showcased through different outlets such as social media (a project blog, Twitter, Facebook, etc.), a children's book, and a moving art exhibition, which we will present in various locations in Jordan and the United States to spread awareness of the children's stories and concerns around the world. The proceeds we collect from these endeavors will be used to sustain the children's creative expressions beyond the Children's Playground this summer, as the funds collected will be donated to programs that allow children to continue pursuing peaceful dialogue and expression.

Through the educational component of our project, we hope to ease the burdens of overcrowded schools in Mafraq. In our Children's Playground, we will offer English classes for the children so that they can begin acquiring a critical language for their future educational pursuits. We realize that the kids will be coming from different backgrounds in English; hence, we will provide individual attention to the

Children's Playground: Fostering Peace between Native and Refugee Communities

Country: Jordan

Princeton University

Wardah Bari '16, Farah Amjad '16, USA

children's needs. In addition, with our background in the Arabic language, we will be able to develop a platform that will allow for increased dialogue between the Jordanian natives and the Syrian refugees to gain knowledge and develop a sincere understanding of the complex situation. Our ability to effectively communicate with the children will allow us to best cultivate their interests and potentials.

Our Children's Playground is a feasible and sustainable project. With the help of local aid organizations, such as Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD-Legal Aid) and Oxfam, we will have the facilities and support networks required to execute our project. The Children's Playground will serve as an afterschool program for Jordanian and Syrian children from Mafraq's local schools and communities. Our program's curriculum is being developed under the guidance of a network of experienced aid workers and organizations who have created educational programs for refugee populations in different conflict zones. Through an effective cultivation of the children's creative interests and potentials, we will ensure that their ability to express themselves peacefully is sustained beyond our summer with them.

This past summer, Wardah Bari, in addition to studying Arabic in Amman, took a course on Peace and Conflict Resolution, with a focus on the Middle East. She studied the culture and values of those involved in conflicts that have spread throughout the region. This knowledge will allow us to understand the situation in Jordan and work closely with the communities to serve them to the best of our abilities. While in Jordan, Wardah also volunteered with the same local organization, ARDD-Legal Aid and Oxfam, which we will be working with for our project. Through these organizations, she visited the Zaatari refugee camp and was able to interact with the refugees and aid organizations there on a personal level. Farah Amjad has a strong passion for journalism and has developed experience through various journalism programs, both within and outside the university. We hope to incorporate these skills to help the children document their stories through writing and social media. Furthermore, Farah's previous experiences working with children in afterschool programs and tutoring English learners is not only effective in designing a good program curriculum but will also ensure a successful execution of the curriculum. We are also both involved with dialogue on campus, as a part of the Religious Life Council, an inter-faith student dialogue organization. Both of our experiences and skills have shaped this project.

We are aware of the challenges of working in a foreign country, specifically one facing serious humanitarian issues. However, through our previous experience in Jordan we have become familiar with the cultural and political climate of the region. With our backgrounds and knowledge of Middle Eastern culture and religion, we will be conscious and respectful of the cultural setting we will be working in. The political stability of Jordan and the support from our network of different organizations and individuals will enable us to pursue our project safely.

We hope to foster sustainable peace through our project in two ways. First, since there is no definite end to the war in sight, it is important that Jordanian and Syrian refugees learn to live together in peace in Mafraq. By helping the children of the two groups build close relationships, these children can then influence their friends, families and communities. Second, if those Syrian refugee children, who one day will return to their divided country after the conflict, learn how to get along with different people in Jordan, they can also learn to reconcile with others in Syria. In this sense, our project fosters peace in Jordan and beyond. With a background in the study of Peace and Conflict Resolution, we realize the importance of the after-effects of the war, and how important it is for children and the members of a community to find an inner peace and reconciliation by expressing themselves through creative means. Dialogue between different communities in the refugee populations of Jordan will allow the people not only to find peace within themselves but also within their communities.

Support Network:

ARDD-Legal Aid/Oxfam and various humanitarian aid organizations in Jordan

Human rights activists in the Middle East: Manal Khader, Alice Su, Nour Joudah and others

Mentor: Matt Weiner - Associate Dean of Religious Life at Princeton University

Princeton University Professors and PACE Center Staff