

One Syrian family's journey amid desperation

REFUGEES' PATH AMID HUMANITARIAN CRISIS TAKES UNLIKELY TURN- TO LOUISVILLE

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A reluctant journey

'WE DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE'

Editor's Note: *With the Syrian refugee crisis reaching a critical point, The Courier-Journal is chronicling the journey of one Syrian family resettled in Louisville — from their struggles as refugees in Jordan to the challenges of a new life. The city has long served as a significant hub for refugees. With 55 Syrians already here, many more are expected after The Obama administration in September said it would increase total refugee admission from 70,000 to 100,000 by 2017. The CJ is documenting the family's experience over the year to put a human face on a crisis that continues to defy resolution. This story was originally published Oct. 1, 2015.*

IRBID, Jordan — They waited until dark.

Hoisting the youngest in his arms, telling his three other boys to stay close to their eight-months-pregnant mother, Ahmad Al Tybawi took a deep

breath and walked into the night — joining other Syrians fleeing civil war through the barren fields and rocky hills toward Jordan.

Each of the boys had a small bag with one set of pajamas and a clean pair of underwear. There were no family photos, no teddy bears, no toys or mementos; all that was gone. Al Tybawi had about \$600 in his pocket, his Syrian identification card and the clothes on his back.

They had to be careful, snaking quietly around Syrian military checkpoints. No one was allowed to speak or smoke cigarettes. Phones were turned off.

For Al Tybawi, a farmer with a high school education, the decision to leave their home outside Dara'a, in southern Syria, in the fall of 2012 had been made reluctantly.

But, he said, “we didn't have a choice.”

The family had lost its home. A sniper had shot a man within a dozen feet of him near a mosque. And twice the family had been forced into basements, where pounding shells shattered small windows and caused minor injuries to one of the children.

Their trek that night was the start of a much longer journey, part of a historic refugee crisis that is straining aid agencies and host countries, roiling Europe and, just recently, has prompted the U.S. to raise refugee admissions.

Conditions are worsening for many of the nearly 4.1 million refugees in neighboring countries, pushing some to attempt dangerous smuggler routes to Europe out of desperation. But earlier this year, Al Tybawi and his family received a chance to move in an unlikely direction — to Louisville, Ky., ahead of a growing number of Syrians to be brought to America.

But first, the family's luck would have to hold out.

Crackdown at home

FAMILY UNSURE WHY THEY WERE TARGETED

They heard the shouts coming from outside the house.

It was near the fall of 2011, and government forces were ordering Al Tybawi, his wife Ahlam Al Swedan and their children outside.



Ahmad Al Tybawi and his eldest son, Abdulbaset, take groceries home through their Jordanian town of Taiyyba.

(Photo: The Courier-Journal)

Too terrified to object, they watched helplessly as the men looted the house and loaded their furniture, TV, washing machine and clothing onto a truck. Then, in a moment that brings the family to tears, their home was burned to its concrete shell.

“It was humiliating and terrible,” Ahlam said, wiping her eyes. “We lost everything.”

For months they'd been caught up in President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on the city that helped spark Syria's Arab Spring uprising. Teenagers in Dara'a had been jailed and beaten after scrawling anti-regime slogans. Protests grew, and police reportedly shot into crowds. Buildings were burned, and police were killed.

Al Tybawi didn't take part in the demonstrations. The son of a farmer, he spent his days growing tomatoes, watermelon and wheat, raising his bright-eyed and energetic children — the eldest Abdulbaset, and his younger brothers Obaidah, Mohammad and Omar — and working on a new home for his expanding family. "It was a peaceful life," he said.

But as uprisings forced rulers from power in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, he began to hope the Assad family's longtime rule, which he linked to corruption, would end as well.

By late March, army tanks had sealed off the city, he said. Checkpoints were erected, supplies were restricted, and snipers targeted demonstrators.

Afraid to go out for bread, they stayed inside and heated bath water on the stove.

While Assad blamed the unrest on infiltrators and outside forces, government forces seemed to be randomly searching homes and questioning residents.

Al Tybawi and his family are still unsure why they were targeted. But after the fire, they moved in with his father.

By November, violent clashes were taking place between the army and the opposition, and shelling became a danger. At one point the boys had to huddle in school with classmates because of gunfire. Soon after that, the couple decided to keep the children home.

"We wouldn't dare go out — we were very scared," Ahlam said.



One of Ahmad Al Tybawi's sons looking as the window of their rented apartment in a village outside of Irbid, Jordan. (Photo: Chris Kenning, *The Courier-Journal*)

Among the refugees

'I WISHED I WAS DEAD AT THAT MOMENT'

The family arrived at the Jordanian border at a time when thousands of people were streaming across each day, some by car and many by foot, dragging luggage and children, blankets and food, pots and pans.

Phil Eanes, a regional coordinator for the International Organization for Migration in Jordan, said officials have “literally seen family members push their sick relatives over the desert in wheelchairs.”



Ahmad Al Tybawi and his wife, Ahlam Al Swedan, carried the bags they'd purchased in the market area of Irbid, Jordan, for their move to the U.S., a rare shot at resettlement.

(Photo: The Courier-Journal)

Once they arrived, Al Tybawi and his family were put on a bus to the Zaatari Refugee Camp, an eight-square-mile field of rock and dirt where United Nations tents, water tanks and medical clinics have been erected since its July 2012 opening. Today it is still home to 80,000

refugees.

In the camp's reception area, large families pressed whatever documents they had into the hands of officials with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who registered them as asylum seekers.

“It was beyond comprehension ... there were tens of thousands of people there,” said Al Tybawi, whose family was placed in a tent with mats on the ground and a long hike from restrooms and water.

That night, his children asleep next to him, the reality of his family's situation began to sink in. He assumed they'd be gone for one month, maybe two. But now he wasn't so sure.

He was in a strange place with no guarantees. He had a large family to care for. Had he made a mistake?

“Honestly, I wished I was dead at that moment,” he said.

Afraid of being stuck where there was little to do, no jobs and with permission required to leave camp, the family fled within two weeks.

Locating relatives who'd already reached Jordan, they borrowed \$140 to cover a month's rent on a rundown apartment near Irbid, a northwest corner of the country now home to more than 143,000 refugees, according to the U.N.

Perhaps things at home would soon stabilize, they thought.

Struggles in Jordan

SHEER NUMBER OF REFUGEES STRETCHES ASSISTANCE

As a mosque's call to prayer echoed off sand-colored apartment blocks of the poor town of Taiyyba, about 12 miles from the Syrian border, Ahlam sat on the floor helping the children with homework.

The apartment, furnished with sleeping mats and cheap plastic chairs, was lighted with a fluorescent tube, and its concrete wall was bare. Clothing was hung on hooks and string, and a broken light fixture dangled from the ceiling. The children were rarely let outside to play.

Approximately 85 percent of Jordan's nearly 630,000 refugees scrape by in similar fashion, rather than in the camps that get most of the media attention. The U.N. says most live on less than \$3.20 a day.

Al Tybawi's family received meager humanitarian aid and food vouchers, and they were often hungry and broke. They also now had a fifth son, Abulhaq, born in Jordan.

Al Tybawi needed to work to support his family, but obtaining a work permit in a country where refugees are viewed as competing for already scarce jobs was nearly impossible. Despite worries about arrest, he took illegal construction jobs, some of which paid \$15 a day. Sometimes his employers shorted him, he said, knowing he couldn't complain.

Twice Al Tybawi was caught working by Jordanian authorities and detained — one time landing him back in Zaatari, which he quickly left again, and another time leading to a longer stretch in detention before he told a sympathetic officer about his family and was let go.

"I was scared they would send me back to Syria," he said.

Meantime, the boys were having a tough time. They had enrolled in free Jordanian public schools, but crowding caused tensions between the refugees and Jordanian students. The children told their parents they were being picked on for being refugees. One child quit studying for a time.

"They came home crying," said Ahlam, who forced them to go.

Al Tybawi realized it would be impossible to build a decent life in Jordan. But waiting to go home seemed impossible, too. The war, complicated by sectarian conflict, the rise of ISIS and outside involvement, refused to end. It had killed a quarter of a million people, displaced half the nation and destroyed schools and hospitals.

The family's struggles mounted as the sheer number of refugees, and the length of the war, stretched available aid.

In 2014, overburdened Jordanian health systems took away free medical care for refugees. Recently, the World Food Program had to cut assistance to 229,000 urban refugees in Jordan. Now, instead of getting \$28 per person a month for food, the family got \$14. Around them, even better-off refugees that Al Tybawi knew were running out of savings.

And that was pushing increasingly desperate refugees to try to reach Turkey and get a smuggler to take them to Europe — presenting dangers that had killed thousands.

"If you're destitute, your children can't get the health care they need, and now you have no food, you're going to say, 'Well, I have nothing to lose,'" Eanes said.

Al Tybawi didn't want to risk his children. But he was stuck in a box canyon of bad choices.

"I have to find a way," Al Tybawi told his wife.

Interview for America

DAYS AND DAYS PASSED WITHOUT WORD

She told him not to be nervous. He wore his best slacks and shirt.

Last spring, Al Tybawi and Ahlam were headed for their second interview with U.S. resettlement officials. Credibility was key, he'd been told. The interview would take hours and include separate questioning to ensure their stories matched. He wasn't worried about being honest.

"But I was terrified to do or say something that would ruin our chances," Ahlam said.

They asked "every single detail about my life," he said, including whether he was a member of an Islamist movement.



In their sparse Taiyyba apartment, Ahmad Al Tybawi and his family share a celebratory meal, a treat after scraping by for years on dwindling humanitarian aid and illegal day labor jobs.
(Photo: The Courier-Journal)

Since the war began in 2011, the U.S. has admitted only 1,900 refugees, citing lengthy security checks as one cause. But the mounting Syrian crisis recently pushed the U.S. to raise its annual cap on worldwide refugees from 70,000 to 85,000 in 2016 and

100,000 in 2017. It's not yet known how many of those would be from Syria.

But for Al Tybawi, there had come a chance, at last, for his family to get their legs under them, with permanent residency and a period of initial aid that included help with housing, furnishings, medical care, English classes, counseling and job placement help.

The boys were all for it, despite knowing little about life in the United States. They talked excitedly about the possibilities. The eldest, a fan of the movie "Rambo," talked of becoming an engineer. Another brother said he'd become "the biggest businessman in the world." Ahlam said she believed the children should join the U.S. military to repay the debt.



But after the interviews, days and days passed without word.

"Have patience," Ahlam told her husband.

When it came in May, news of their acceptance sparked jubilant hugs, tears and frantic cell phone calls to relatives, who shrieked at their fortune. A weight had been lifted.

"I felt like the whole world wasn't big enough," Ahlam said.

Saying goodbye

'HERE WE HAVE NO CHANCE'

In the busy market district of refugee-packed Irbid, horns blared as Al Tybawi and his wife strode through hot, dusty streets toward a narrow luggage stall. The open air shop, hung with children's school bags and suitcases, had in recent months become a frequent stop for refugees planning perilous journeys by boat to Europe, or back to Syria despite the dangers, its owner said.

But the \$15 suitcases Al Tybawi picked were headed to a destination rarely seen in the shop, news that caused the owner, Saeed Al Rajjal, to break out in a smile, shake his hand and offer celebratory cups of Turkish coffee.

"We didn't want to leave home, but here we have no chance," Al Tybawi told the owner.



Abulhaq Al Tybawi, age 3, covered his head from the rain as he and his mother enter their new apartment in Louisville. Abulhaq and his family are refugees from Syria, who were brought to Louisville by Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Sept. 29, 2015.

(Photo: By Pat McDonogh, The CJ)

Over a special family dinner before their departure, eating chicken and rice off a big platter on the floor, they discussed the place to which they were being resettled —

Louisville. They'd heard about Kentucky Fried Chicken. But how much were the cars? Where could you grow vegetables? Where would they live?

As their departure date neared, the family had medical screenings and learned that after five years they could be eligible for U.S. citizenship. They had tearful sessions with relatives, including Al Tybawi's 80-year-old father, unsure when they'd meet again.

Excitement masked the challenges ahead. They have no savings. They speak no English. They lack higher education. The kids will have to adjust to U.S. public schools, and Al Tybawi will need to find a job with a good wage. They carry deep traumas. Expectations are high, perhaps too high, and the culture shock is sure to be sharp.

In addition, some Americans are wary of Syrian refugees because of fear of ISIS and terrorism.

Louisville, however, has long been a welcoming resettlement hub for refugees, taking in more than 1,000 Iraqis since 2011 and expecting as many as 150 more Syrians next year as admissions increase.

And the plight of Syrian refugees — underscored by the photo of a 3-year-old boy washing up on a Turkish beach, which galvanized world concern — has led to many offers of community support and aid, said John Koehlinger, director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries, which will oversee the family's resettlement.

In late September, the family packed their bags and put on outfits they'd chosen and washed 10 days earlier. The day before they left, the children were barely able to contain themselves. They packed most of the clothes they had, and a Quran, "for safety and God's protection," Ahlam said.

After boarding a plane for the first time in their lives in Amman, they crossed the Atlantic and saw Kentucky's green landscape coming into view from the windows — a vast change from the monochromatic desert landscape of Jordan.

They walked into Louisville's airport reception area, surprised and overjoyed to be greeted by sponsors and supporters, who accompanied them to their Beuchel area apartment. Ahlam was grateful and happy.

Al Tybawi's luck had held this long.

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How to help

- Donations to provide services and support refugees from Syria and other countries can be made to:

Kentucky Refugee Ministries

969-B Cherokee Road Louisville, KY 40204

- To donate to broader humanitarian efforts, visit UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency at donate.unhcr.org/international/syria

By the numbers

Syrian refugees in Jordan:

- 628,619**: Registered Syrian refugees in Jordan
- 519,228**: Number in Jordan living outside camps, often in substandard housing
- 229,000**: Syrian urban refugees excluded from World Food Program aid in September because of lack of funding.
- 90,000**: Syrian refugee children in Jordan who are currently out of school.
- 86%**: Approximate percent of urban Syrians living on less than \$3.20 per person per day.
- 58%**: Syrian refugee adults with chronic conditions unable to access medicine or other health services as needed.

Source: UNHCR

About Chris Kenning

Chris Kenning, 44, has been a staff writer for The Courier-Journal since 2001, covering issues such as education, health care, poverty and immigration and specializing in narrative storytelling. He also has written stories from countries such as Haiti, Syria, the Philippines, Mali, Cambodia, Brazil and Guatemala. He previously worked at newspapers in Oregon and served as the Kentucky correspondent for USA Today. Kenning holds degrees in journalism and international studies from Miami University of Ohio and the University of Oregon.

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