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FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Visual Portraits of Za'atari Syrian Refugee Camp

Salam Neighbor (Jordan). 2015, color, 75 min. In English and Arabic with English subtitles. Directors: Zach Ingrasci and Chris Temple; Producers: Zach Ingrasci, Chris Temple, Salam Darwaza and Mohab Khattab; Distributor: Tugg Educational; 4210 Spicewood Springs Road, Suite 200, Austin, TX 78759; edu@tugginc.com; edu.tugg.com.

After Spring (Syria/Jordan). 2016, color, 101 min. In English, Korean, and Arabic with English subtitles. Directors/Producers: Steph Ching and Ellen Martinez; Distributor: Tugg Educational; 4210 Spicewood Springs Road, Suite 200, Austin, TX 78759; edu@tugginc.com; edu.tugg.com.

The Syrian Civil War, now in its sixth year, has displaced an estimated 11 million people (with numbers constantly escalating), nearly half the country's population. Of these, the United Nations estimates 4.8 million Syrians have fled their homeland. News reports have tended to focus on the struggles of those crossing the Mediterranean and seeking asylum in Europe, but most refugees have sought safety in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, where they have dispersed and "settled" in towns and cities. A comparative few have settled in host government and/or UNHCR sponsored camps. Jordan's Za'atari Camp, just seven miles from the border, is the largest Syrian refugee camp. Its population peaked at more than 120,000 residents and currently has between 75,000 – 80,000 residents most of whom are from the Dara'a area. The camp is numerically equivalent to Jordan's fourth largest city.

Shot within a few months of each other, two recent films, *Salam Neighbor* (2015) and *After Spring* (2016), provide intimate portraits of how Za'atari operates, the services the camp provides, the lives of refugees, and what may be their futures. Za'atari is jointly operated by the UNHCR and the Jordanian government. The UN manages the camp, and at least 100 NGOs fund and

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provide essential services. Perhaps because it is near Amman, Za'atari has become the poster camp for Syrian refugees. In order to maintain its salience in the mind of potential donors, the camp hosts celebrity visitors, has its own public relations officer, and a social media presence (Facebook and Twitter). In fact, it is the most photographed and filmed refugee camp in the world.

Salam Neighbor emphasizes daily life by following the interactions of two filmmakers, Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci, who gain permission to move into Za'atari and live for a month as refugees. Intended to inspire audiences to get involved, the documentary follows the duo from pitching the project through their weeks in the camp. Once granted approval by the UN camp administration, Temple and Ingrasci travel to Za'atari where they are issued camp IDs, assigned a living spot, and are presented the standard-issue tent, furnishings, and provisions. Unlike actual refugees they pay for their supplies.

As the pickup reaches their assigned site, the filmmakers' soon-to-be neighbors appear to help them set up. In short order, their temporary home is ready, but almost immediately the Jordanian police determine the camp is not safe for overnight stays. The film team is forced to find accommodations in Mafraq, the nearest city and one overflowing with refugees. This unforeseen twist affords the opportunity to observe the more typical side of refugee life. In Mafraq, the filmmakers' neighbor is Ghassoun. Like most refugees, she opted not to go to the camp. Her husband remained in Syria, so like a quarter of refugee families, she is the household head. Ghassoun lives with her children in several rooms and supports them with funds from NGOs and by selling homemade crafts. Her children attend a Jordanian run school for refugee children.

In Za'atari, the camera follows the duo as they travel about the camp, providing insight into how residents and staff cope with daily life. The camp has medical clinics, food distribution points, social service agencies, and a women's center intended to provide women the opportunity to interact with others outside their homes. In some of the cases shown, traditional gender roles are altered with men taking on typically women's tasks while their wives have found work outside the home. At least a few women have turned hobbies into money-making activities. Once admitted to the camp, refugees cannot leave and are not permitted to work outside. To set up a business in Za'atari, camp residents must find a Jordanian partner who can provide the merchandise for the camp. With a huge and captive market, the estimated 3,000 merchants have developed a flourishing economy whose epicenter is a dirt road euphemistically called the Champs Elysees. Za'atari 's economic growth hints at a long-term problem. *Salam Neighbor* states that

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refugees typically stay in camps for seventeen years (This statistic is from a decade-old United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) publication and only refers to people in UNHCR camps and does not include Palestinians who have obviously been in camps much longer. There is some skepticism about the figure). Many families are even adapting their very small trailer homes into more permanent dwellings. As Kilian Kleinschmidt, UNHCR camp manager, points out, the UN has neither the funding nor the skills to maintain the city the camp is becoming. Moreover, while the UN and NGOs can provide temporary assistance, they are not structured to make the necessary long term investment in human capital.

Steph Ching and Ellen Martinez's *After Spring* takes a different approach, utilizing video clips, some from camp residents and others from news sources, to introduce the uprising in Syria and conflict's advancement to the beginnings of the refugee crisis and the creation of camps like Za'atari. Viewers are introduced to Ibrahim Rashid and his family who were the first residents when the camp opened in 2012. He had been in a government prison and was in the Free Syrian Army before deciding that it was best for his five children to escape the war. In detailing his history, he makes clear the unspoken truth of camp life, people have escaped physically, but are mentally still in Syria.

After Spring, like *Salam Neighbor,* features the social services provided in the camp. Interviews with social workers reveal their commitment and afford insight into the issues they encounter, ranging from requests for better housing or adaptive services to serious issues such as crime and domestic violence. About a dozen medical facilities provide primary health care, with all newcomers vaccinated to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Among the specialized clinics are those providing obstetric and maternal care. *After Spring* shows one of these clinics in which nearly 2,000 babies had been born and received postnatal care.

Kilian Kleinschmidt describes the development of the camp from temporary tents to more permanent caravans. Key to his description is that refugees are not necessarily poor people who must rely on aid, but people with skills who want to work and have started to create an economy within the confines of Za'atari. Residents' futures are very uncertain. Most hope to return to Syria but at least some want to emigrate to the United States or Europe. Although very few applicants are likely to be accepted in the United States, Za'atari offers resettlement classes that explain the process, helps with applications, and explains what to expect in the US.

As in *Salam Neighbor*, Kleinschmidt laments the futures of children in the camp and fears a lost generation. More than half the camp residents are under

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eighteen and at least 15,000 of them do not attend classes. Visuals suggest these are primarily boys, who prefer doing odd jobs and hanging out, but the images may be misleading since girls stay closer to their homes.

Extended coverage in the film is given to the Za'atari Taekwondo Academy directed by Korean martial arts master Charles Lee (Lee Chul Soo) who lives in Amman. After a visit to the camp and seeing that children were depressed, he began offering Taekwondo classes. With Kleinschmidt's support, initially he borrowed an NGO's tent a few days a week to offer classes. The program has been so successful that Lee was granted space to build a permanent academy for classes.

Both films make clear that no matter how well refugees appear to cope, the conflict is never far away. Occasionally shelling can be heard in the camp and constant access to family, television, the Internet, and phones means that refugees are well aware of what is happening in Syria. Trauma is a long-term issue not easily presented on film, yet *After Spring* and *Salam Neighbor* allow individuals to express their frustration as they mask their fear and uncertainty.

After Spring and *Salam Neighbor* introduce viewers to refugee life through a clear, nonjudgmental approach. This is the strength of these films. Yet, inadvertently, each film's emphasis on Za'atari may skew viewers' understanding. Despite the filmmakers' best efforts, it is very easy for viewers to overlook that camps house a very small percentage of refugees. Likewise, camp life is portrayed as a new normal. But there is nothing normal about large families living in small caravans, sharing cooking areas and toilets, all behind barbed wire.

These are very accessible, well-made films that are ideal for classroom use. Each relies on the standard documentary technique of focusing on a few individual cases that come to represent whole classes of people. This approach puts very human faces on what would otherwise be an anonymous situation. College students can easily engage with these characters and gain an appreciation of their dire situations. Each film provides plenty of material to promote discussion of Za'atari and refugees in general. Because neither film can cover all topics, there are plenty of subjects for future discussion and research. I highly recommend using either of these timely and thought provoking films in class.

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