



## INTERVIEW WITH AYTAN OSMAN REFUGEE CAMP WORKER IN IRAQ

*Please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to pursue the very noble work you have been pursuing.*

My name is Aytan Osman, I am 24 years old. Last year I completed my Bachelor degree in International and European Law. This year I am about to complete my master degree in Globalization and Law with the specialization in Human Rights. Furthermore in the beginning of this year I have been the legal research assistant of Professor T. Degener for the Committee on the rights of people with a disability and also have helped research for In1School for a collective complaint against the Dutch Government on the denial of the right to exclusive education for children with disabilities. Next to this I have also worked with the Red Cross, supervising projects within the Netherlands as well as collecting clothes for refugees in Iraq. I love working on the field as well as doing research behind a desk.



During my Bachelor degree we had the chance to go on an internship, for me this was my chance to work at a NGO which I wanted for a very long time, especially in a conflict region. When you watch the news and you see so much suffering around the world, as a human rights student you want to help wherever you can. That is why I started searching for a NGO where I could work on the field as well as on a higher level thus politically. I found the Jiyana Foundation for Human Rights in Erbil, Iraq, and immediately contacted them.

*What is a typical work day like at a refugee camp?*

For me a typical work day at the camp was not the same as my colleagues, especially not in the beginning. I was very lucky to be allowed to join a small group of colleagues who went to the refugee camp to provide for medical and psychological treatment, I was the only one in the group with a legal background. Thus twice a week when we arrived at the camp they went to their cabins to start treating their clients and I started walking around the camp to see what we could do for the people. After a few weeks, I started giving English classes for the children, because there was no school within the camp yet. I started organizing projects for the children to get outside the camp, to provide the children with winter clothing and to help open the new school within the camp as well as attend the meetings to discuss the future of the refugees within the camp.





### *What is the most challenging aspect of the job?*

The most challenging aspect of working at a refugee camp for me was to see all that suffering from very near. I got to hear stories which no one should go through. I talked to refugees who had a perfect life in Syria, who had a better life than the most of us and now they are seen as a burden, they get second handed and ripped clothes to wear. It is very hard to see all this, because you feel worthless, you do not know how to help and what to do. It is not only the fact that they live in such a situation now but also the fact that most of the refugees and even the workers at the refugee camp started to give up. By giving up I mean not believing in better days, not believing that their situation might get better in a few years. Majority of the people whether they were refugees or the workers, they were constantly negative. This was for me the biggest challenge, because I am and always have been positive, whatever happens I stay positive, but I came to work into a region where I did not get to meet not even one person who was like me.





### *How did you embark on the decision to work at a camp?*

Since the conflict in Syria and Iraq started I wanted to go back to Iraq and help the people there, I wanted to do something, whatever it was I could do just to do something for them, to make a change. With this intention I moved to Erbil for 6 months to start this internship. I had no plan on whatever I wanted to do at the camp or how I would get there, nor did I know whether the NGO would even allow me to go there. I just knew that I could help in some way and which I did. The first week I started working at the NGO, I noticed that there was just a small group of my colleagues who went to the camp to provide for psychological treatment for the refugees. Not one person with a legal background went to the refugee camp because it was considered not necessary. I knew that if I asked my supervisor to go with the group, he would say why would you go? What are you going to do there? You have other office work to do, what can you possibly do at the camp. This would be a legit question, however I would have no answer to his questions because I indeed did not know what I would do there and what I could do to help. Therefore I explained that I could never predict what I could mean for anyone if I did not know the region or the problems. I could not just predict what I would be doing if I have never been to a refugee camp before. I did promise him that there would be something for me to do there which I was sure of. This is how he allowed me to join the group and I got a pass into the camp.

### *What makes the work fulfilling?*

For me it was to see those children smile again, to see them being children again. It was very important for me to give children good childhood memories, I knew that they would not forget the horror they faced in Syria however I could make their life at the refugee camp more bearable and a memory they would look back to with a smile. When I started working at the camp, it felt like I fell into a black and dark well. Everyone was negative around me, I only saw suffering and sadness. I could not bear to see those emotions on children's faces. That is why I worked to make those faces smile again, which was the most fulfilling of my work.







*What do you do to keep the people you work with in good spirits (both colleagues/volunteers/staff members and people who live in the camp)?*

This is a very good question, especially because this was one of the most challenging experiences in my life. In the beginning I could not bring anyone in good spirit, I started myself with a good spirit but everyone else's negativity started to make me weak. The first few weeks at work I came home with headache and so much frustration because I did not know how to make everyone believe that it could work out and that life is not all about suffering, that life can be beautiful, you just have to stay positive. Whatever their mood was, it did not change me, I stayed positive, I did get frustrated but I did not show it. After two weeks I knew that the only way I could prove my colleagues wrong was to prove it. To prove that we can make a change and to see that change is the most beautiful thing in the world. That was how I started to give English classes to children, we taught children not what to think but how to think. I made sure that my colleagues were involved in the whole process of seeing how these children changed from being depressed to being happy children. Children do not need much they just need the right attention and love. Thus my way of keeping everyone in a good spirit was to make them accept everything as it is however to make the most out of it. To make a change and see that everything can work out positively if you believe in it and work for it as a team.





***What did you need, but did not have to do your work better/to help the people you work with better?***

Money, if there would be money there would be less suffering. The whole problem at the camps is that there is not enough money to spend on these refugees, to make their life bearable, to make their living conditions better. There are too many refugees and too little sponsors.



***What is the biggest misconception about working at a refugee camp?***

That you can do whatever you want at a camp, thus work wherever you want and with whomever. It is not true, there are very strict rules on even getting inside a camp. You do not get nor get out of a camp easily. Everyone working inside the camp have a specific function and are registered by the director of the camp.

***What is the most inspiring and the most difficult part of your work?***

The most difficult part of my work was to work in an environment where people did not see life in a positive light and that in the beginning of my work I felt hopeless and worthless. I did not know how to help everyone and what I could do. The most inspiring part of my work was to see how much of an effect a child's smile can have on people.

***What advice would you give to a young person who aspires to work in the field?***

I would say you should definitely do it at least once in your lifetime. You will not regret it and you will grow as a person. You will get to know the world and yourself. Always stay strong and fight for what you believe in. Another important thing do not change who you are but you have to adjust to the environment, you have to know their way of living, their culture, religion and respect it. If you do not you will not be respected nor accepted in the community.

***What is the general atmosphere like at the camp?***

I felt like the atmosphere at the camp really depended on the weather, especially in Iraq where in the summer it can go up to 55 degrees Celsius and in the winter heavy rain falls who ruin the tents. I have witnessed both seasons which was really hard to see. The heat inside the tents and especially in the winter months, how cold it could be with all the mud that came from outside. People getting frustrated and children being scared that the storm would hit their tent.





*What is the security like? Have there been any attacks on the staffers of the camp and how are they mediated? Who provides the security?*

The security was very strict, no refugees were allowed to go outside the camp nor was anyone without a UNHCR pass allowed to get inside the camp. Even though the camp was approximately 40 kilometers away from the nearest ISIL station, I have never felt unsafe because of the Peshmarga's defending the borders of Kurdistan. Erbil is within the Kurdish region of Iraq and well protected against threats from outside.

*What are the educational facilities like?*

After the summer holidays a school was opened within the camp however the school was not big enough to enroll all the children within the camp.

*Are there appropriate facilities for children and how are they?*

Yes, but not enough and not known by everyone within the camp. The NGO we worked with was ACTED, which was an amazing group who helped the children.





***What is the mental health state of people? Are there any appropriate facilities in which these issues are addressed?***

Not good, the majority of refugees within the camp are traumatized including children, thankfully the NGO I worked with also provided for psychologists who came to the camp and treated everyone individually, those who could not be treated at the camp were sent to the office or a hospital on the costs of the NGO.

***What do you think of the process of community building in the camps? Seeing that usually the people living in the camps have lost their communities, support systems, sometimes even their closest family and friends, what do you think, how people find the community support?***

This was very important for the people, it was so beautiful to see how the refugees inside the camp started their own community. The most funny thing I found was when I started a project to organize a trip outside the camp for the children, I asked my colleague whether we had to go to every tent to spread the news, she just said “no you just tell one person and everyone will know believe me”. While the camp consisted of approximately 1000+ families.

***What are the measures that are being taken so that radicalization is prevented? Have you faced any instances of radicalization, especially among younger people?***

Not at all, everyone I had contact with and worked with was just glad they have survived and wanted to live again and forget everything they had seen.

***Are there any resources over which there is always a fight (food, water, sanitation products, toys etc.)?***

Another fact which not a lot of people know or is talked about in the news, which also shocked me is that there is a whole community within the camps. There are supermarkets, barbershops, clothing stores, mosques and even a wedding hall. Thus people bought their food and needs from those supermarkets and most of sanitation products they would receive from the different organizations within the camp.

***What is the role of money in the camp? How do people exchange goods and services? Is there some sort of an internal system of exchange?***

Every person within the camp receives a certain amount of money per week for expenses. There are people who started a business within the camp by for example opening a barber shop, they cut one persons hair for some fruits and vegetables or for money.

***What is the role of international organizations, humanitarian agencies, INGOs and local NGOs?***

International organizations and NGOs have a very important role in Iraq. NGOs have provided for the tents, the sanitation facilities and health facilities inside the camps. Every organization has a different role and mandate within the camp.





***What is the role of local structures (municipalities, state ministries, police, military)?***

The government provides for the weekly payment of the refugees and of course the security of the camp. The ministries also organize different projects for the refugees.

***How do the people living in the camp treat the staffers?***

The refugees literally receive everyone with open arms. Even if you just pass by their tents, they offer you something to drink or if you need a shelter against the bright sun.

***In your personal opinion, what would be the best/ fastest resolution for the refugees?***

This is a very difficult question to answer because I do not think that there is one. I just hope that the conflict wherever in the world will come to an end soon and to stop the suffering of these people. furthermore, I think it will also make a change if people would understand what these refugee have went through and do not look at the refugees as if they are a burden. The world has to understand that refugees are humans too, they might even have had a better life than we have. The refugees that I worked with were professors, doctors and school teachers who had a perfect life until their life got ruined and they did not have anything left anymore.

***What languages do you speak? Have you experienced any particular troubles due to language/communication barriers?***

I can speak Dutch, English, Kurdish, Turkish and a little bit of Arabic. I did not have communication barriers because the majority of the refugees spoke Kurdish or Arabic, I understand Arabic fluently thus





we could communicate in one of those languages. I am Kurdish myself thus I knew the culture and the language.

***Have you experienced any threats? What is the process of addressing personal threats?***

No and no one I worked with, if anyone would experience any threats there are competent authorities you can report it to.

***What is the biggest injustice you personally are facing while working at camp and you believe the people at the camps are facing?***

For me none however for the people at the camp I think it is that they all got the label of being a refugee, as if that is not being a human or that is a different kind of race. I think this is very wrong and a very big injustice, because they are humans the same as you and me and anyone else. They have feelings and a dignity. They also deserve to be respected and accepted. Unfortunately this is not always the case, refugees are treated so differently which I cannot even describe sometimes. I always just ask one question, what if it would happen to you and all of a sudden you live in a camp and someone comes to you and gives you a bag out of pity. You open the bag and you see some old clothes, some even dirty and ripped. Would that make your situation better? Would you feel better about yourself? For me this is the injustice I have seen against refugees and that was why one of the projects I did in Iraq to provide children with winter clothing, especially shoes and coats, was brand new ones not second handed and not ripped ones. No matter how bad someone's situation is no one deserves to be treated with pity.





**What do you think is the biggest misconception, especially on the Balkans, about the refugees?**

That the refugees are a burden and a threat to security and peace.

*Thank you very much for sharing your story with us Aytan. Is there anything else you would like to add?*

I would like to add one of my most heartbreaking moments with one of the children I worked with at the camp. Raman, if you would look at him you would never expect such a child to draw so much horror on one paper. One day when I saw his drawings I was in shock and did not know what to say or how to react especially because he was standing right in front of me looking at me with his big brown eyes. His drawings show what he has seen and what he is scared of. When the doctors spoke with his mother I went to sit with him. I decided just to do what my heart told me to. Just start by simply talking about what he exactly drew on that paper and his life in Syria. He explained that the second drawing shows that he is scared that ISIS will come to the refugee camp and will kill him and his family and the other drawings what he has seen and still is seeing on the news. ISIS and Peshmarga's fighting, bodies everywhere and chaos. When he spoke I saw not only his face changing but his mood as well. Now I could see and feel his fear. I just could not imagine what he has been through before coming to this camp and if it was not all bad enough he ended up in a camp where he was not even sure whether he would be safe or not. How can you feel safe in a cold tent, without a proper door leave alone a lock.





After a few minutes of talking there was just one thing in my mind and that was these children need to feel safe again. I knew that they would never forget what they went through however they should know that life is not all about killings and war. They should remember again that they are children. I am not a psychiatrist nor a pedagogue, I am a human being who wants to help those children. I have been a child, I have little sisters and cousins. I know how a child acts and thinks about when they have not seen war or did not grow up in a conflict zone. They draw a house with their happy family, they do not draw fire guns and death bodies. Thus I had one thing in my mind which was to get Raman his beautiful mind back, without the guns and war.

I gave Raman a pink rose and asked him whether he could draw that rose on a paper. The first thing he did was taking a black pencil, which is a color no child should use for making a beautiful rose. Instead I gave him a pink one and explained that the earth is full of beautiful colors which we can use to draw something beautiful. While he was busy drawing the rose, I drew some light blue clouds, after that he made the whole drawing by himself. He started using a lot of different colors, and was explaining that he was drawing an apple tree, a river, a house, the Kurdish flag and that love and 7ob was written in the flag.





This kid is so beautiful, every child is beautiful, they are powerless, they are fragile and they are harmless. I learned that children must be taught how to think, not what to think. These kids have seen so much horror, the only thing they can think about is their fear of seeing all the horror all over again. When he told his story I almost cried, but I did not because I did not come here to feel sorry for these people, I came to make a change even if it is a little. This kid went from a horror drawing to a drawing that is worth millions. He was smiling after he saw his drawing and gave me a high five. I cannot put into words how happy I felt that day.

After a few days I saw Raman and his little brother again. They came to me both with a big smile on their faces and showed me a few drawings they made very proudly. This is what a child should think about and should be drawing. I only asked him to draw me something beautiful and instead he drew me so much more. No ISIS drawings for Raman anymore.

