

Name: _____ Class: _____

Diary of a Teenage Refugee

By Amira
2013

In the spring of 2011, protests erupted in the Middle Eastern country of Syria against President Bashar al-Assad's government. The protests were met with violence. The conflict gradually led to rebellion. Now, Syria is experiencing a civil war that has already left over 400,000 people dead and created 4.8 million refugees who have left the country, as well as another 6.3 million who have had to flee their homes for elsewhere in Syria. Millions more have been left in poor living conditions with shortages of food and drinking water. The following account comes from a 16-year-old Syrian girl named Amira detailing the past three years of her life in a refugee camp in the neighboring country of Lebanon. As you read, take notes on the different ways Amira's life has changed since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

- [1] Amira is a pretty normal 16 year-old. She's got the usual interests: pop music, boys and her mobile phone.

But, along with 30 million other children and young people around the world, she's a refugee. Amira lives in a camp with her family after fleeing the civil war in Syria. This is her story, in her own words.



"Syrian refugee camp, Karkosik Erbil" by Mustafa Khayat is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0.

Amira's Story

One night the bombs were coming closer and closer. We were all sitting together downstairs because we couldn't sleep. As houses were being destroyed one by one in our village, neighbours were running from one house to the next. So some neighbours were gathered in our house too.

A rocket landed on the roof of our house, but no one was injured. We ran in fear to another house. We were so terrified we didn't even think about taking anything with us. Soon after, our house was totally destroyed. We left with no IDs, nothing.

- [5] Our dad took us out of the country through a smuggler. We escaped that night in a rented car. Whenever we passed a checkpoint, we hid under the seats of the car and the driver covered us up.

We crossed the border illegally, through the mountains. We got out near the border and had to walk about 100 metres¹ across the mountain. When we heard a plane, we started running. We were very scared.

1. 100 meters is about 328 feet.

The Camp: Life on Hold

When we arrived at the refugee camp, there were already many tents. We bought some materials to make a tent—some wood and plastic sheeting. The men built it. Our tent has two rooms and a kitchen area. There are 13 of us living here.

The neighbours helped us by giving us things like bottled water, mattresses, blankets, cups and plates. We could pick up and leave at any time, as we don't have anything of value here. My most treasured things are my necklaces. I wear them all at the same time, because they have many memories. One was given to me by a boyfriend, but I don't want my mother to know about that!

We have so many needs that you can't count them. At home things were cheap. Everything is expensive here. We even have to pay for water. In winter there was snow halfway up the sides of our tent and we couldn't even see out of it. At home we had our own bedrooms, but here we all sleep together in the tent on the ground.

- [10] We can't go to school here, and there are no jobs available because too many people are looking for work. We don't even have any books. So we just help out with cooking and cleaning, or watch TV all day. We are really bored.

To pass the time we do each other's hair and draw pictures of each other, or listen to popular songs on the TV. We also make our own clothes.

We are afraid because the government doesn't know we are here. If they find out, we could be sent back to Syria. But the UN² protects us.

Some of the people who are not registered go into the mountains and hide whenever the officials come to count people in the camp. Then they come back to the camp afterwards.

Homesick

We hear from home mostly via WhatsApp³ and sometimes TV. Only a few old people are still living in our village. There are a few rooms still standing in the destroyed houses, and they live in those.

- [15] We have to pay for water to be brought in by truck, but it's very dirty. But now we have a water filter in our tent. We now have a latrine⁴ that was installed by an NGO.⁵ We receive food distributions, so we have enough food. We make large amounts of simple meals that we can share out easily for all the children, like rice, beans and peas. There are shops, hairdressers and tailors here.

It helps to know that we are not alone, as there are many others here in the same situation as us.

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2. UN stands for the United Nations, an organization of 193 countries formed after World War II to prevent international conflict and promote world peace.
 3. WhatsApp is a mobile messaging app that allows people to exchange messages without having to pay for a text messaging plan.
 4. A latrine is a toilet or outhouse, especially one used by large groups in a camp.
 5. NGO stands for "non-governmental organization," which is any not-for-profit citizens' group that is organized on a local, national, or international level.

We've been here for three years now. We miss everything about home. We would love to go back.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the central idea of the text?
 - A. Amira is a normal teenage girl living through extraordinary circumstances as a refugee.
 - B. Amira and others like her have built communities in refugee camps that resemble home.
 - C. The United Nations needs to better protect refugees, particularly those fleeing Syria.
 - D. More refugees should tell their tales in order to spread awareness about the issues they face.

2. Which statement best describes how the refugee camp is first portrayed in the text?
 - A. Life in the camp is safer and easier than life at home, where there is war.
 - B. Life in the camp is engaging and fun because community members make it so.
 - C. Life in the camp is difficult and dirty, and there is no sense of community support.
 - D. Life in the camp is uncertain and there is little to do, but the community is kind.

3. PART A: What does the term “smuggler” most closely mean as used in paragraph 5?
 - A. one who books safe passage for legal immigrants through dangerous places
 - B. one who leaves a country to escape danger
 - C. one who secretly moves something or someone from one country to another
 - D. someone who avoids paying taxes for goods they bring in or out of a country

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “Soon after, our house was totally destroyed.” (Paragraph 4)
 - B. “Our dad took us out of the country” (Paragraph 5)
 - C. “We escaped that night in a rented car.” (Paragraph 5)
 - D. “We crossed the border illegally, through the mountains.” (Paragraph 6)

5. How does the following quote contribute to the reader's understanding of Amira? "My most treasured things are my necklaces. I wear them all at the same time, because they have many memories. One was given to me by a boyfriend, but I don't want my mother to know about that!" (Paragraph 8)

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How is Amira similar to young girls in your country? How is she different?
2. In the context of this passage, how are people changed by war? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.