**We Are All Refugees Now**

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11 April 2020

*The coronavirus has made us all refugees, of a sort, in our own homes, with no idea when – if at all – our old lives will return. But we’re adapting*

On 13 March 2013 I left my [home town of Damascus](https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/syria-jordan-refugee-camp-feature-cities-of-the-damned) as a refugee of war. I was a 20 year old architecture student at the time and I had no idea what life might look like outside my parents’ home. A part of me wanted to stand on the border and look back at the ruins, knowing that it was the last time I’d ever see my homeland but my voice of naivety and hope said, “Don’t be dramatic. It’ll only be a short time. Treat it like a holiday. You’ll definitely be back.” I imagined life returning to something like normal, continuing my degree, my friendships, our in-jokes, my family nest, my life as I knew it. It is important for human beings who have change forced upon them to believe that at some point it will all magically transform back to something familiar. It is our motivation to survive. We are staying alive precisely because we believe our old life is one we can have again.

In the meantime, I needed to put one foot in front of the other, push on and find a safe haven. I didn’t know what skills I had that might come in handy or what skills I needed to learn along the way. I didn’t know if I’d end up in a country where I had to learn the language from scratch or how to manage the people I met on my journey and that some would be kind and others suspicious and hostile. A refugee is learning all the time. Every time you cross a border, are stopped by an official, need to source food, you need to be learning a new language, different customs and sometimes extreme survival skills. If you cross a dangerous sea in an overcrowded dinghy and almost die, there is not a minute to collect yourself on your arrival on a foreign beach. You must immediately climb a mountain to check yourself in at a government reception centre. The only certainty is uncertainty. The only known is the unknown. Your only country is no country. Your new normal is a different normal every day.

Seven years and seven days after my original exodus, on 20 March 2020 I left my new home town of London, where I’d lived for two-and-a-half years, because I was invited to stay in the countryside for the coronavirus quarantine. I’m a 27 year old A-level student, having finally started my education again, not being able to prove any of my previous qualifications. I also run a small jewellery business called Road From Damascus (because I had my epiphanies coming the other way) from the bedroom of my new adopted family’s home. It was before the lockdown and I told myself and the loved ones I was leaving in London that I could come back and forth, even though the voice of experience inside told me that situations like this turn quickly and maybe that wasn’t the case. But as a veteran refugee I know that if there’s an emergency there’s always a way to get where you need to be. “Never say die” is more than a metaphor for us. So I left.

British people who can’t remember the Second World War are reminded of it because some of the corner shop shelves are empty and you can only buy one loaf of bread in some Tesco Metros\*. Some people are comparing Britain to a police state because officers are issuing fines to sun bathers. A war without bombs and a police state without beheadings in my experience make for unmeaningful comparisons. However, there *are* parallels and as both [the Queen](https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/the-crown-season-2-netflix) and Vera Lynn, who remember the Blitz\* very well, have observed, something of a similar spirit is required. In truth some people will die of this virus and some have already. Some of us will grieve those deaths and not be able to say our goodbyes because of contagion. Some of us will be financially ruined. Some of us will become homeless. In those ways, it is like a war. For most of us, it is a perilous, lonely waiting game, but I am only being a little hyperbolic when I say that we are all refugees now. This is why.

Only four weeks ago the coronavirus seemed remote and more like something in the news rather than something in our lives. When we first heard about the Arab Spring\* in Damascus, we were sure of only one thing – it’d never happen in Syria. It was happening to people “over there” pictured on the television and it was impossible that it could happen to the real life people I knew. When I first got to London, I remember seeing the look in people’s eyes – the look that said that nothing could ever happen to them. That was a familiar look because I used to have it. Sometimes people would ask me about my most traumatic experiences as if they were adventures. I was a Syrian refugee and the kind of person world events happened to. I was one of the ones from “over there” pictured on the television but in their pub. Now I am seeing British people’s eyes change with the revelation all refugees have: “Oh, now a very big thing is happening to me and I have no idea of knowing what will happen next.”

The same question is being asked all over FaceTime all over Britain and all over the Western world, “How long will this go on?” This is also the most common question asked in refugee camps. “How long will I be here? When will things be better? When will someone let me return to my normal life or something like it?”

If someone had told me I had to live on the road and in refugee camps for 12 months and then I’d definitely be able to return to Syria, where my old life would be mine again, I’d have treated it like a really tough gap year. Even if it’d been three years or five years, I’d have created a strategy for what I could do in that time, counting down the days. If someone had told me when I was living in the Calais Jungle refugee camp, you’re six months from London, where you can start a new life, the possibility to plan and the patience to wait would have made everything so much more bearable. Even refugees who get to a safe country are sometimes left without papers for years, which means they can’t work, study or build anything new. They’re in perpetual tortuous quarantine, because no one will answer the question, when will this end?  This is what you’re experiencing now. The unknown timetable. Will your business go bust? Will you be made redundant? Will the bank run out of mortgage breaks? Will your ill grandmother die? Will these things happen before you’re allowed out? Before you can move on? When can you start planning again?

You’re new to the refugee game, so let me give you some advice. You can’t plan for the future. You can’t guess how long it will be. So don’t. Plan for today. Shop for the week. Have goals for the month. Pause your long-term ambitions and work on small achievements you can control. You’ve lost control over the future, but Covid-19 has proved you never really had it. This is a great time to learn to enjoy what you can right now and do what you can with what you have today, because that’s all that’s certain. Small moments of connection and laughter are the best things you’ll ever have. You’ve probably forgotten that in your quest for greatness and future hypothetical happiness.

Right now you are displaced from your big, bold, adventurous life but you are displaced inside your house. You’re an ironic refugee because the only place you’re allowed to be is your relentless four walls. It is important for human beings who have change forced upon them to believe that, at some point, it will all magically transform back to something familiar. But life will not be the same after this.  We don’t know what our new life will be; what new laws, social customs, travel restrictions, hygiene norms and ways of doing business there’ll be. This is a new chapter. I’m used to new chapters that look nothing like the last one. I’m good at this. But so are you. Now you’re learning to stay at home all day every day. You’re adapting. You’re finding ways of having fun on the House Party app, doing Ready Steady Cook with what’s in your cupboards and learning to have intimate conversations on FaceTime. Human beings are extremely good at getting used to things. Whatever comes next, you’ll find a way at first to survive and then to thrive and perhaps even enjoy some of it more than what you had before. I’ll never get my old life back but some of my new life is more liberating than what I had. I’ve lost. I’ve gained. Sometimes need makes flashes of real happiness easier. Managing to get a glass of wine in a refugee camp gave me a thrill I’d never get from a whole rack of wine now. Have you got even one loo roll now and a bag of pasta? Then things could be better – and they could be a lot worse. Right now we just need to put one foot in front of the other, push on and I believe that most of us will find a safe haven once more.

***\*Blitz- the German air raids on Britain at the beginning of World War II***

***\*Arab Spring- a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across of much of the Middle East in the early 2010s***

***\*Tesco Metros- supermarkets***