

How Photographer Osama Esid Takes You to a Syrian Refugee Camp Without Leaving Your Seat

If you had to leave—right this moment— and run across the border, what would you bring with you? Osama Esid knows that often the heavy things are what people leave behind.

“I was born in Syria, and I’ve lived here for 17 years; still, I was so surprised to see their acceptance, hospitality and their joy,” Osama said about the Syrian refugees he recently visited in a Turkish refugee camp.

When Esid visited the camps on behalf of Mizna, an international organization devoted to promoting Arab-American culture, he was greeted by a man who lived there known as Mr. Suleiman—who agreed to let Osama photograph the inside of his tent. A world-renowned photographer and visual artist, Osama decided to transfer the photographic likeness of Mr Suleiman’s tent to a very large backdrop.

“People can see themselves in the tent, and Mr. Suleiman can have them over,” said Osama, who will then bring the photos of those who wish to participate back to Mr. Suleiman’s tent to share with his former host and others he met while in Syria.

Project Still/Life/Syria

“Getting into the camp was extremely difficult,” said Osama, who after arriving in Turkey had to spend three weeks working with Turkish officials and border security surrounding the camp. He said

refugees do not experience many new faces, and many people are still fleeing Syria to get into places like the camp he visited.

“Public art, is open and it is for all of us,” Osama said. “The public nature of this event speaks to the humanitarian nature of this project, and it is really a bridge to bring smiles to both sides of this issue and across the ocean.”

Osama has an intimate relationship to photography and is critical of those who would point cameras at Syrian people in places of conflict. He remarked that mainstream media too often flattens the conflict, and dehumanizes Syrian refugees.

“To have them displayed in an artistic project, to bring dignity to their experience, they were really acceptant to this and I think I had an experience unlike any journalist,” he said as he remembered very receptive and joyful response they had to his time there.

It was a very conscious decision not to utilize expensive equipment and digital production in his process while in Turkey. Instead, Osama arrived with a 100-year- old instant camera made of wood he modified in Egypt years back, along with a few Polaroid cameras. As he gathered photographs of the people in the camp, which will be on display along with the backdrop, he gave many of the test shots to the children he met.

Kids are Kids

Osama said the Syrian children were overjoyed with the opportunity to be photographed (school picture day had not happened since they were in the camp), and word spread quickly of a cameraman in camp. Osama soon had an unintended entourage of playful children following him, dressed in their best clothes. “Humans are similar in every way, we are different in our songs and culture, but in our heart and

especially when in conflict we are the same,” he said. “The people in Syria really feel that no one is talking about [Assad and the plight of the refugees].”

Osama went to say he hopes people will relate more to people who have been displaced.

Bridge Building

Forming a connection across the world is tough to do, even with all the technological aids to communication that we have. Esid said that, “A postcard would make a huge difference over there, more than money.” “One of the very few things that made it into the camp was this good humanity, none of the anger or the aggression was welcome.” said Esid, as he used his hands and shoulders to gesture the heavy nature of what should be left behind.