

Threads of Memory

Refugee Communities of Amman

Amman, June 2022



Photos by Silvia Mazzocchin / JRS Jordan

Amman is a patchwork of hills, stairs and endless houses. It looks like a compact city, but looking closer we can see the lines that divide the city between the well-off and the disadvantaged neighborhoods, where people at the margin of society live... disadvantaged Jordanians, and refugees. Jordan is one of the countries that hosts the highest number of refugees, relative to its own population. Syrians fleeing the war sought protection here. However, Syrians are not the only ones that found refuge in Jordan.

Refugees living in Jordan come from Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Iraq, Palestine, Eritrea and other disadvantaged and war-torn countries. Non-Syrian refugees are the ones that struggle the most to begin a new life in the country, as most international donors and funds target the Syrian population. In addition, legally these refugee minority communities enjoy less rights when it comes to job and residency permits, and support. They often feel blocked in limbo, with their uncertain economic and legal statuses straining their well-being and mental health, and hindering their plans for the future. The connection with their own country and their roots is often just based on memories, collective and personal – as many know that their chances of returning are dim.

The NGO Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) operates in this context. Following its mandate to serve, accompany and advocate for all refugees and the most vulnerable, the organization opens its doors to everyone. JRS offers a unique meeting place for many displaced communities – a safe space to gather, learn together, grow, share memories, and create new ones.



Memories are like threads of a colorful and embroidered dress. They are woven together, they draw a pattern, they create the fabric of our personality that we bring along our lives, and that continuously get enriched by new colors, patterns, threads, based on the challenges, the successes, and the encounters. For people on the move, displaced, and refugees, the memories of their countries of origin become visible in the simple gestures of daily life... food, language, dances, music, and clothes. Traditional dresses, for example, often are related to memories of their roots and country, to celebrations, time shared with family, traditions. In these photos, people who had to flee from their country share their story, their threads of memories, courage and strength. They tell us what brought them to Jordan, and what they carry with them on their ongoing life journeys.

Amman, JRS Community Centre, June 2022. Mohammad holds in his hands an embroidered scarf from Yemen, called “shall” or “sumata”, traditionally used to cover one’s head.





Amman, JRS Community Centre, June 2022. Mohammad puts his hand gently over his head, a sign to greet and welcome, typical of Yemen and other Arabic countries. He comes from Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, where he used to live and work on a farm with his family. He was studying petroleum engineering in Egypt. After moving to Jordan to get married, he was unable to return to Yemen due to the outbreak of war.

“What can I say about Sanaa? Sanaa is so beautiful! Anyone that lives there is not considered as a foreigner, but as a Yemeni! The old city is surrounded by huge walls, and it has 7 gates. The first skyscraper in the world is in Sanaa. You can find everything in Sanaa” he says. He misses his family, who still lives in Yemen. In

Jordan, he faced many risks, and continuous discrimination at work. In Jordan, he faced many risks, and continuous discrimination at work. At JRS, he found a second home, but he wishes to travel to another country, to find better opportunities, respect and dignity, and obtain the basic needs of life for him and his family.



Samah, from Iraq, shows a detail of the dress made by her mother, embroidered with images of the town where she used to live, and people dancing together. In the region she comes from, Qaraqosh, every village has a different dress that depicts important places and moments for each community: Christian holy signs, churches, flowers, people, animals.

Amman, Jesuit Center, June 2022. In the garden of the Jesuit Center, Samah remembers the Palm Sunday celebrations they used to attend in Qaraqosh. People would walk from different churches, gather, wear the traditional dresses, walk and sing together. It's a happy moment as, and the olive branches and flowers of the garden around her remind her of her hometown.

She left Iraq because there was no work or future for her and her family there. In her Christian community in Iraq people speak Syriac/Aramaic, which is said to be the language spoken by Jesus. Here in Jordan, she is learning English with the Jesuit Center and JRS, and she is waiting for an opportunity of resettlement.





The hand of Mohammad tightens on a black and white Kufiya. The Kufiya, which is said to be originally from the city of Kufa, in Iraq, is a traditional scarf used in many countries of the Levant. The black and white one is usually associated with Palestine.



“This is the first place outside the refugee camp where I came with my dad”

The Citadel hill overlooks the old centre of Amman. “This is the first place outside the refugee camp where I came with my dad” Mohammad says. As a Palestinian refugee, he grew up in the camp of Jabal Hussein. His family comes from Jaffa and Jerusalem, but he has never been able to see these cities. The activities in the camp while he was growing up helped him to improve himself and his personality, and to better deal with other people and other cultures by accepting and respecting those who are different. Everyone helped each other.

Now, he is a scout leader, and he dreams of creating a centre where children can improve themselves and learn to rely on themselves. He is now learning filmmaking and editing, and he hopes to create content to raise awareness about the situation of his country and to share it around the world.

Yasmeen holds her hands over a traditional dress from Somalia, a long fabric that gets wrapped around the body.





“I remember my house in Somalia, we used to have a big garden, we used to gather at night under the moonlight, sit in circle, and my grandmother would tell us stories to scare us”

Yasmeen recalls. She left Somalia with her family when she was 7 years old, as her family was part of a minority ethnic group that was at risk. After 10 years in the UAE, they moved to Jordan. For the last 10 years, she has been living here, and attended many activities with JRS and the Jesuit Center.

“We felt welcomed at the Jesuit Center, we feel like if it’s our second home... we felt like that because we are not judged based on where we come from. We could act simply like humans, and this was more important than nationality, religion, culture. We didn’t feel like we are different from the other people, we felt like we have the same problems, issues, as refugees. We felt connected to others—both refugees and local people” she says. The garden of Darat el Funun reminds her of all the people she had the chance to meet through the Jesuit Center. An American friend met there brought her to this garden, and it has become one of her favorite places in Jordan.



The hands of Idriss hold a traditional hat from Eritrea.



Before arriving to Jordan, Idriss found refuge in Sudan.

Eritrean people fleeing conflict moved to different countries including Syria, Sudan, Egypt and Iraq. In Amman, the community is small— Idriss knows just about 50 people. He feels that people don't know a lot about Eritrea. In Jordan, he and his community face a lot of struggles. He feels that they have less rights than other refugees, difficulties to access work and struggles with the language, as Eritrea has many different languages different than Arabic.

“I wish that people knew that there is a country called Eritrea, and about its people. I want them to know that we have rights and that we are a revolutionary people”
Idriss says.



The arms of Abukar, from Somalia, are crossed over his shirt with patterns and colors from the African continent.



“But now I consider myself as someone who has a dream...”

Abukar has few memories of his home town, Mogadishu, he was just 5 years old when he left Somalia with his family. “These memories are important because they are the only connection still left with my background, with my community and culture. Without these memories I would consider myself as someone who doesn’t have an ID. Someone who is not belonging anywhere. This makes me connected to people and to the land I was born in” he says. He has been part of courses and activities from JRS and the Jesuit Center since he was a teenager.

“It’s like a school for me, not just for different subjects, but it’s a school of life, they gave me the glasses through which I can see the world, and how I can be a different Abukar, and how I can accept people from different backgrounds. Without the Jesuit organizations I would be a normal Arab/Somali individual, living in Jordan, waiting to travel. But now I consider myself as someone who has a dream” he says. “Also, the Jesuits build my personality in another way: through meeting different people from different countries. Here is the only place where you can meet 10 different nationalities, countries, religions, sitting at the same table, sharing ideas without any bias, and without any conflict. And this helped me to know that everything I believe sometimes is not the right thing, and sometimes is not the wrong thing. We need to accept each other—even if we disagree with each other, at least we know what’s the best way to deal with each other. This widened my mind, through meeting different people. Everyone that suffered from different conflicts and different wars came here and shared this. And I knew from these encounters that my problem is not the biggest problem, and there are many people who went through worse than me, and they keep dreaming, and they achieve many great things”.



The hands and fingers of Manal are adorned with henna patterns from Sudan. Henna for Sudanese women is the foundation for make-up. Only married women have their hands painted. Having the hands painted with henna means that the relationship with their husband is good. If a woman doesn't renew their henna regularly, the community will start to inquire if there is any problem in the couple.



Her secret for the smile she carries with her through life: “Be patient, and never give up

“I came to study in Jordan in 2007, as an exchange student to do a PhD in physics at the University of Jordan. I came with my husband and 2 children. We never thought that we would be refugees one day. In 2008, the conflict that had started in Darfour reached Khartoum. So we lost the hope of returning to Sudan, and became refugees in Jordan” Manal shares. Before the war, she was a lecturer in physics at Al Fasher University. “My life was peaceful and full of happiness” Manal says. A memory of her past is connected to the social life in Sudan, the presence of a big family around her. Many generations were living in the same house, sharing not only physical spaces, but life and stories.

“The life here is very difficult” she says, “As refugees we are not allowed to work, I can’t be a lecturer anymore. We miss the elderly people, who preserve the old traditions and stories. We feel like we will have a gap in passing on these stories. My son asked me why his grandfather cannot come here—he wants to meet him and listen to his stories directly”. Despite all these challenges, Manal says, “Up to now, I have never given up! I have a computer ready on my dinner table and I’m studying English, at the Jesuit Center and JRS”. Her secret for the smile she carries with her through life: “Be patient, and never give up”.

Namariq wears a colorful “thobe”, typical of her homeland, Sudan.





“I wasn’t a patient person before, but I remember what my grandmother used to tell me... God will give you time, but he won’t forget you. I learnt that this is true”.

Namariq grew up in Sudan with her grandmother. She remembers with love her “haboobti”, that’s how she calls her. When she left to Jordan, trying to reconnect with her family, she faced many struggles and difficulties. For long time she was on her own, without any support from her family. Despite the hardship, her talent, strength, and leadership skills didn’t pass unobserved. She joined a group performing traditional Sudanese music. The responsible started to give her many tasks and trust, and eventually she became the person leading the group. She joined the activities of Sawiyan, a local grassroots organization, and through the people met there she connected to many other NGOs, such as JRS, and a women theatre project. From just a participant, she became the assistant to the director, and then a facilitator with the organization Seenaryo, that works with theatre.

“COVID time was tough for many people. But for me it was the beginning of everything. I met my husband, that supported me in everything, and encouraged me to volunteer and take courses. And I met many other people that trusted me and believed in me” she says. “I wasn’t a patient person before, but I remember what my grandmother used to tell me... God will give you time, but he won’t forget you. I learnt that this is true”.

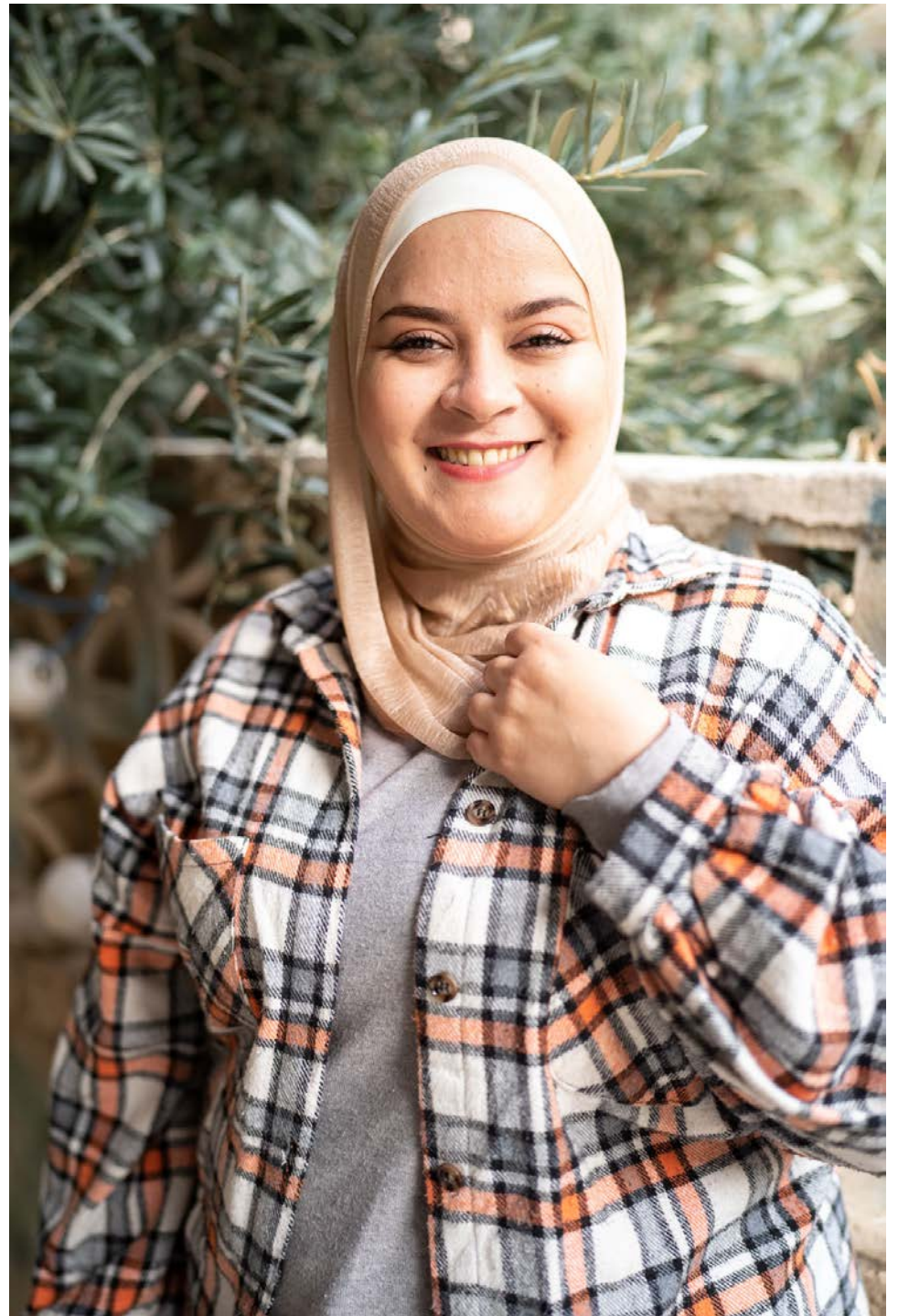


Eva, from Syria, holds some of her hand-made embroidered pieces. She learnt on her own how to make embroidery. What was just a hobby became a way to support herself and her family financially, and also psychologically. Each product has a story in itself.

“Be Yourself” is a message to remember how to get through the complicated moments of life. “I have many experiences, starting from Syria and then in Jordan, full of ups and downs. I asked many times to be supported, and many times my requests were rejected, so I realized I have to be independent. I have to be an independent woman, and to be myself” Eva says

Eva left Syria and her previous life in 2012. She was working in a radio as a presenter. The first years in Jordan were not easy, she was keeping constantly checking the news about her country, and being full of sadness. “Then I decided it was time to change something. Whatever happens next, I have to make use of my time now. First of all, to earn an income, and also to develop myself, learn, change my mindset” she says.

She started to study human resources, and hospitals administration, and to attend JRS courses. She is active on social media, especially TikTok. “On my channel I try to spread positive messages and positive energy, as most the people that contact me are destroyed or feeling down” she tells, “Life continues, you don’t have to be stuck, you should have a wider perspective so you can see other things, other possibilities”.





Ahmad holds in his hands a traditional handmade hat typical of the region where he comes from, the Blue Nile area in Sudan. The garments that he wears are typical of Hausa people, an ethnic group spread over many different countries, from South Sudan to Niger, and many other neighboring countries such as Nigeria, Chad. The vest is called “galabiya”, the pants “serwal” and the hat “tagiya”. The traditional shoes usually worn are called “markoob” and are made of leather from tiger skin or snake skin.



“I would like to merge education and sport – to be educated in the sport, and to let other people benefit from my knowledge and skills in this”

The region where Ahmad comes, the Blue Nile area in Sudan, has been suffering for long time because of conflicts and violence. Ahmad left alone when he was young, to move to Khartoum, for safety and to build a better future. There, he became a professional runner.

When he moved to Jordan, he started to train and support other young and talented athletes from Sudan. “I would like to merge education and sport – to be educated in the sport, and to let other people benefit from my knowledge and skills in this” he tells.

Life put many struggles in front of him, but despite this he kept studying, and in JRS he found not just a place to learn and grow, but also a place of new friendships, a place to meet people from different countries, and learn how to interact with diversity. A place where he can come to change his mood when he feels down or upset. “From the sport, I learnt to be responsible and to rely on myself. It taught me that I have to be patient, and to learn how to adapt in any situation. And also that the result you look for will not be immediate. Any effort you do now, the result will be later on” he says



Fowza, from Somalia, holds in her hands a drawing she painted. She started painting just as a hobby, when she was a kid. What started as a hobby became then an expression tool.



“It helps me to organize my thoughts, communicate my message, and to connect with other people through art. So it’s more like a therapy to me. It helps me to relax, to release some stress and the outside pressure. It helps me sometimes to disconnect from the world”

Through this drawing, Fowza wanted to reflect on how impatient this cat was, and how the cat was not willing to take risks. “Taking risks is an important part of our lives. Without taking risks, or without being patient, we will miss many opportunities. It is all about being patient, trusting the process, to do whatever it takes and let aside the fears, and also the hesitation.]

ust grab the opportunity and benefit from it, instead of being worried, and wasting our time blaming ourselves or other people, or other external factors. It is about not being mad or hard on ourselves. It is about admitting that we are not perfect, we have our flaws, and we have our limitations. And striving to be better, working on our limitations, and weaknesses, and becoming a better version of ourselves”.