

🕒 **EMPATHIZE**

Aline Sara thinks that it's important for people to understand the real human aspect of the refugee crisis.



LET'S TALK THIS OUT

BUSINESS
FOR GOOD

“NaTakallam” means “We talk” in Arabic—an apt name for a startup that is breaking down language (and other) barriers surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis

By **CHRISTINE GROVÉ**
Photographs by **NOUSHA SALIMI**

UNLESS YOU'VE BEEN living under a fairly large rock for the past six years, or are an avid follower of the American presidential candidate Gary Johnson, you should know of one of the most protracted and complex refugee crises of our time.

More than half of Syria's pre-war population—more than 11 million people—has either been lost to war or forced to flee their homes. And neighboring states are now inundated with a bulk of those displaced, who have been fleeing the conflict since 2011.

Among the Arab states hosting Syrian refugees, Jordan and Lebanon have already had to contend with difficult socio-economic conditions arising from the refugee crisis, especially in areas and communities, where refugees have now settled.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), host communities in Jordan and Lebanon now face a myriad of pressures stemming purely from the refugee crisis, including unemployment, lack of access to public services, child labor, social tensions, and more.

“And then it struck me—these people are not even allowed to job hunt”



TRAINING THE TRAINER

The NaTakallam team recently visited an informal settlement in Halba, in the north of Lebanon to conduct a small training session with some women who will be joining NaTakallam as conversation partners soon.

“The evolving nature of the crisis necessitates a response that encompasses humanitarian and development interventions, which provide access to livelihoods and decent employment,” the ILO said recently, in what was a call for help.

The ILO says that almost all Syrian workers in Lebanon (approximately 60% of the total Syrian refugee population) are employed in unprotected and potentially exploitative conditions in the informal economy. And they aren't faring much better in the rest of the neighboring states either.

Unfortunately, policy development in the Arab world continues to fail refugees and natives alike, with very little being done to properly integrate them or facilitate access to employment and livelihood opportunities.

The problems are many. Work visas, to start with, are almost impossible to come by for refugees. Without any legal way to work in Jordan and Lebanon, they struggle to find odd jobs and end up accepting low wages that often don't even cover their most basic needs.

“The situation is slightly better in the Kurdish Autonomous region of northern Iraq, where Syrian Kurds can legally work, but opportunities are now limited because of the conflict there. And language is still a barrier,” the ILO says.



TAKING A LEAD

After half a decade of conflict, governments and the UN are still struggling to get their acts together regarding the crisis. At the same time, the regional business community is also largely absent from the discourse surrounding how to address the situation, perhaps unsure of whether they should take responsibility for such a vast and complex issue.

A tiny fraction of those connected to the entrepreneurial community, is however, acting to mitigate the worst consequences of the crisis, be it on a small scale.

Among them are the founders of NaTakallam, an online network connecting Syrian refugees with Arabic language students from around the world, which lets the refugees earn a small living in exchange for language lessons.

Co-founder and CEO of NaTakallam, Aline Sara (a Lebanese-American), found the concept for the startup in her own life story. Growing up in New York, Sara had always struggled with Arabic because, as it is with many Lebanese families, French usually came first.

But her annual trips to Lebanon helped her to stay connected to her Arab roots, and after completing her undergraduate degree, she moved to Beirut, where she worked in human rights. It was then that she decided to make a concerted effort to improve her Arabic language skills.

“During my time there I noticed the significant increase in interest for the different Arabic dialects versus the modern standard Arabic,” she says. “When I came back to New York I wanted to continue working on my Arabic but I didn't need a full-on course like the one offered at Columbia [University] which is a heavy couple of hours per week, and very heavy on the grammar. And then when I looked at private tutoring options, they were very expensive.”

This is when the idea for NaTakallam sprouted. Having observed the influx of Syrians into Lebanon from close up, where now one in five people in the country are Syrian refugees, Sara was well aware that very few of them would be able to obtain work permits.

“So many of the Syrians arriving [in Lebanon] are middle class...they have their lives ahead of them...degrees in their pockets. They’re qualified engineers, lawyers, etc. They can obtain asylum and be granted a residency. But they can’t legally work.”

Having just graduated from Columbia University with her masters and feeling miserable on the post-school job hunts like most of us have, Sara had an awakening of sorts.

“I think everyone can relate to the feeling of job hunting and how difficult it is,” she tells us. “And then it struck me—these people are not even allowed to job hunt. Even in a philosophical sense—I mean, you are kind of your work, right?”



TAKING THE LEAP

Together with her co-founder Reza Rahnema (a French-Iranian international relations professional), Sara decided to create a network that would pair Syrians with people like her, who needed help learning Arabic.

Bearing in mind that their target market ranged from college students to news reporters, and others who didn’t have a tremendous amount of money, the duo also planned to keep the lessons affordable.

By July 2015, the founders were ready to launch the online pilot version of NaTakallam. The founders started cautiously, testing the waters to see who’d be interested. Then the news broke of little Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old refugee boy who had washed up on a beach in Turkey. His picture, face down in the sand, was splashed across the world’s newspapers.

“Together with this heightened awareness about the refugee crisis, and a few key people around the Middle East sharing our story, we went [live and] viral in the last week of August.”

A CRISIS THAT GROWS



FAMILIES FLEETING VIOLENCE

There are more than 4.7 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. Nearly one million have applied for asylum in the safety of Europe. More than 13.5 million people are still in need of assistance inside Syria.

CHILDREN CAUGHT IN WAR

More than 50% of Syrian refugees are children who’ve lost everything.

MASSIVE DISPLACEMENT

Syrians form the world’s largest refugee population. Nearly 6.6 Million people are internally displaced.

TURKEY

2,620,553

LEBANON

1,069,111

1 IN 5 PEOPLE IS A SYRIAN REFUGEE

JORDAN

637,859

1 IN 13 PEOPLE IS A SYRIAN REFUGEE

IRAQ

245,543

EGYPT

118,512

Overnight they received over 5,000 shares and hundreds of signups. “We really weren’t prepared for this. But it opened our eyes, and we both thought—OK! We’re doing this!”

Since then, the pair has registered their company in New York and have made rapid strides in connecting people with Syrian partners. In partnership with American universities, NaTakallam is also working to bring a real world element to tutoring college students looking to enhance their Arabic studies.



LOCAL/GLOBAL

NaTakallam’s reach is not just restricted to the US though.

“Our audience is completely global. We even have people from the Central African Republic signing up. I would say we are 60% US-based in our clientele. Followed by UK and then France, Italy, and Dubai,” says Sara.

For now, the website is only in English, but Sara and Rahnema consider themselves “global entrepreneurs” and plan on developing it to include many more languages.

Many Syrians who have migrated to Europe or Brazil—where they are legally allowed to work, struggle with the local language, making finding a job that much harder. This is where NaTakallam steps in to help them bridge the gap.

“We speak multiple languages and I really believe that this can be an amazing global platform. We started working with Syrians in Lebanon, but we now are also working with Syrians in Germany, France, Armenia, Egypt, Turkey and even Brazil, who have opened their doors to refugees with humanitarian visas,” she says.

According to Sara, for these Syrian refugees, becoming a conversation partner is a very exciting and empowering achievement. It gives them a tiny bit of all the dignity they deserve. “They are the ones helping the students...they are the ones teaching the world about their language, their culture,” Sara says.

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Source: MercyCorps