

The Sudanese in the Hashemite Kingdom: A Story of Socio-Economic Discrimination

By Trevor Jones

In late August of 2015, the United Nation's High Commission on Refugee's office in Amman, Jordan was surrounded not by police, or military, or violent dissenters but by peaceful Sudanese protestors. This group of Sudanese refugees were out in force to protest unfair treatment by the United Nations. While the United Nations's High Commission on Refugees, or as it is more commonly referred to U.N.H.C.R., has a mission of aiding and serving refugees, in Jordan their mission often seems to neither aid nor serve the Sudanese population.

As I arrived in Jordan for a six weeks of work with refugees and research, I expected my daily life to involve Syrians, Palestinians, and Iraqis. I had not expected, however, the close friendships I would build with a group of refugees not often associated with Middle East refugee crisis: the Sudanese. Over the course of my six weeks in Amman, my daily life working for the Jesuit Refugee Service and living with the Jesuit Community in Amman would intricately involve the Sudanese—so much so that my initial research interest in religious minority refugees would shift to a different type of minority group, the racial minority Sudanese in Jordan: whose dire plight is so often overlooked and ignored.

The Sudanese in Jordan, and Sudanese refugees throughout the world, are largely from Darfur. An area in Sudan known for its rich oil reserves—oil reserves that led the Sudanese government to systematically relocate, persecute and murder residents of Darfur in a quest for access to oil drilling. In my time speaking to Sudanese refugees in Jordan, the painful past they had experienced was evident, as they recounted stories of murder, rape and starvation at the hands of their government—simply because they were from the oil-rich region of Darfur.

Tragically, however, the United Nations does not recognize the situation in Darfur as a declared refugee crisis. While refugees from regions of declared refugee crisis have a far easier time being

processed and relocated into a neighboring country or regional refugee haven, refugees coming from regions of undeclared refugee crises face nearly insurmountable obstacles to relocation. Rather than having the merits of their refugee status judged upon based on where they are from, refugees of undeclared refugee crisis face individual scrutiny far greater than the personal inspection performed on declared refugee crisis migrants.

How did this play out for the Sudanese friends I had made in Jordan? Rather than easily obtaining visas at the border, like Syrian or Iraqi refugees, or finding easy acceptance in airport customs, these Sudanese had to make use of loopholes and openings to flee from their dangerous homeland. One Sudanese refugee recounted to me how he had made use of Jordan's medical tourism industry to make it to Amman. Jordan, in an attempt to boost and promote its healthcare facilities, permits travel to Amman for the sake of receiving treatment from Jordanian doctors—allowing patients to bring someone to accompany them. This refugee, like many of my Sudanese neighbors, was forced out of necessity to bend the system and accompany a patient so that he may flee persecution in his homeland. While Iraqis and Syrians rightfully gain easy access to the Jordanian safe haven, Sudanese lack such opportunity and are left scrambling to find their way to safety and out of the crowded camps the harsh Sudanese government has forced them into.

The challenges for the Sudanese I encountered in Jordan did not end once they had found a way into the country. Unlike most of their refugee counterparts, the Sudanese refugees in Jordan have one notable difference: their skin color. While Iraqis, Syrians and other ethnically Arab refugees are able to take steps to mesh into the fabric of Jordanian society, the Sudanese are often outcast—left isolated in their own local communities, subject to racial discrimination and government scrutiny not faced by the majority population of Arab refugees in Jordan.

This isolation often forced them to live in their own communities—alienating them from Jordanian society and denying them any sense of normalcy or assimilation. Sudanese would often live in specific neighborhoods in shared homes, go to the same café's and eat together. Iraqi's, Syrians and other refugees on the other hand often would integrate with other refugee communities and low-income Jordanians.

While Jordan is largely a hospitable and friendly nation to refugees, the stories Sudanese recounted to me of their interactions with Jordanians lacked any semblance of the praise heaped upon the Hashemite Kingdom. In conversations with Sudanese one word kept surfacing, "Abu Samra": the Arabic word for chocolate. In Jordan this word is equivalent to racial slurs towards African Americans here in the United States. Yet in Jordan, this is a word spoken to the Sudanese without hesitation by everyone from neighbors to employers to police officers. One Sudanese refugee told me, "[I] thought coming to Jordan would be something safe but unfortunately it's not."

This racism pushes the Sudanese further and further to the fringe of Jordanian society, into a social isolation that permits a great deal of economic exploitation and manipulation. While like other refugees in Jordan, the Sudanese can not legally work, they still seek out employment to support themselves and their families. This act is not abnormal, and refugees from every nationality in Jordan often break the law to seek out a living wage; however, the end results of employment are often disastrous for Sudanese refugees. In a group discussion with Sudanese refugees, countless stories of unpaid wages were recounted to me by employers who need not fear legal repercussions and who are not ethnically bound to the Sudanese like they are to Syrian, Iraqis or other '*brother Arabs*'

The Sudanese are less than 3% of the refugee population in Jordan, numbering a little over 3,000. So, it is natural that they do not receive the focused attention charities pay towards Syrians and Iraqis. But, what brought the Sudanese refugees outside of the U.N.H.C.R. Amman headquarters was not

that they faced less attention; it was the fact they were paid nearly no attention—that they lived in a society of social and economic racism. They were so ignored that when the Jordanian police arrived at their protest to arrest them, few spoke out. When they were illegally deported back to the dangerous Sudan they had fled, no one intervened. What happened to them after deportation is unknown.

Pushed to the fringe of society by blatant and structural racism, Sudanese refugees in Jordan lead lives of strife and struggle. Seeking a safe home, they instead find an unwelcoming nation—a place where they will be cursed at, robbed of wages and ignored. It is a situation best summarized in one sentence told to me by a Sudanese, “I leave my country because there is segregation, because there is no respect, now I come to find life as a human being and I don’t find it.”