

NEWPORT
ART
MUSEUM



**PORTRAITS:
A Window
and a Mirror**

Featuring

**Rania Matar:
Samira, 2015**



*Rania Matar, Samira, Bourj
El Barajneh Refugee Camp,
Beirut, Lebanon*

From the series "Invisible Children," 2015,
Archival digital pigment print, 36.8 x 44 in.
framed, 2019.001.003

About the Artist



Rania Matar was born in Lebanon in 1964 and moved to the United States at the age of 20. Initially trained as an architect at the American University of Beirut and at Cornell University, she studied photography at the New England School of Photography and Maine Photographic Workshops.

Matar's work primarily focuses on the daily lives of girls and women in the Middle East and in the United States. In 2009, Matar began teaching photography, offering summer photography workshops to teenage girls in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps with the assistance of non-governmental organizations. During one of her visits to Lebanon, Matar was struck by the marked increase in refugee children she saw on the streets of Beirut. It seemed to her that these children were perceived as simply "the refugees", and that defining them as an anonymous group rather than as individuals made it much easier for the locals to ignore the magnitude of the refugee crisis. Through her portrait series "Invisible Children" she endeavors to portray their humanity and dignity.

Matar has received a number of grants and awards including the Guggenheim fellowship in 2018, and is currently associate professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

Description of Artwork

In *Samira (2015)*, the **subject** of the photograph is a young woman wearing a vibrant, red head scarf staring directly at the viewer. She wears a simple dark colored shirt and blue jeans. She is standing in front of a concrete wall that is splattered with white, green, and yellow paint, and what looks to be Arabic graffiti. Exposed rebar, broken concrete pieces, and exposed green wires indicate the area has suffered damage of some kind. In the upper left corner of the image, a portion of the outdoors is exposed, subtly revealing similar concrete structures surrounding the space that Samira occupies.

About the Artwork

Samira is a part of a series titled “Invisible Children.” While visiting Beirut in the summer of 2014, Matar was struck by the number of Syrian refugee children on the streets, and how they appeared to be generally ignored by the Lebanese population. She began photographing these “invisible” children, expanding it to include children living in the Palestinian refugee camps.

Lebanon has a population of 6 million people, over 1 million of which are Syrian refugees and about half a million of which are Palestinian refugees. Matar was “truly moved by the children, teenagers, and the young mothers begging on the streets, struck by the fact that they had become almost faceless and invisible to the locals...they were living in a temporary limbo that was becoming more permanent by the day.” Matar has known the subject of this portrait, Samira, since she was only five years old. At the time of this photograph, Samira was fifteen years old, and has been included in many of Matar’s works and series. Samira is a third generation Palestinian refugee, meaning both Samira and her parents were born and raised in a refugee camp. Many Palestinian refugees are people, and their descendents, who were displaced or expelled from their homes during the **Palestinian Exodus of 1948**. Other refugees include those fleeing from ongoing conflicts in Syria, Israel, and Palestine. As refugees, they are not considered residents of any particular state, which denies them access to rights allowed to other foreigners living in Lebanon.

Though she reminds us of these children’s marginalized status in Beirut, Matar does not allow them to merely fade into the background. Samira’s bright red scarf draws our attention to her rather than the ruin surrounding her. She takes dignified portraits of each child, asserting their individual identity. Simply put, Matar puts a face on the refugee crisis and reminds us of our humanity.



Questions for Viewing

Look carefully and describe in detail what Rania Matar has documented in this photograph. What can you infer based on your observations?

What does Samira's facial expression and body language reveal about her **mood**? How do you think she feels about being photographed?

Consider the **setting** of the photograph. What does it tell you and why is it important?

Is artwork an effective or important form of protest? Should an artist respond to politics? Are certain artists obligated to make political works and others not?

Has discussing Matar's photograph changed what you think of when you hear the word "refugee"?

Activities

Draw a self portrait

Consider your pose, location and details such as objects, colors and textures, that help convey mood and tell a story about you. Share student drawings with their classmates anonymously and discuss. Are students able to identify each other's self portraits?

Write a Letter

Young people often feel invisible to adults. Why do you think they don't see her? If you could, what would you say to the adults who don't see Samira? Write your thoughts in a letter to them.

Write a Letter

If you met Samira, what would you want to share with her?

Non-fiction Writing

Describe a time when you felt invisible. Who didn't see you? What were the circumstances?



Palestinian refugees

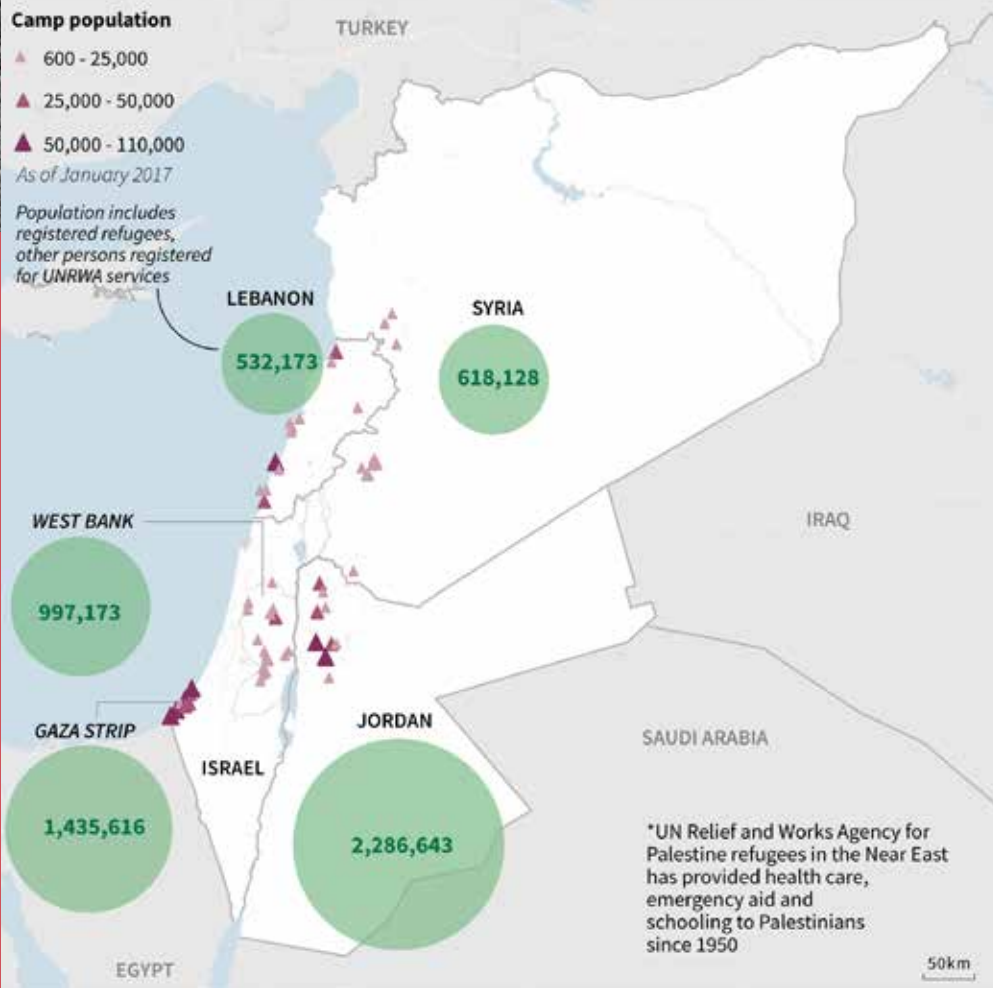
Main camps with registered Palestinian refugees, based on UNRWA* data

Camp population

- ▲ 600 - 25,000
- ▲ 25,000 - 50,000
- ▲ 50,000 - 110,000

As of January 2017

Population includes registered refugees, other persons registered for UNRWA services

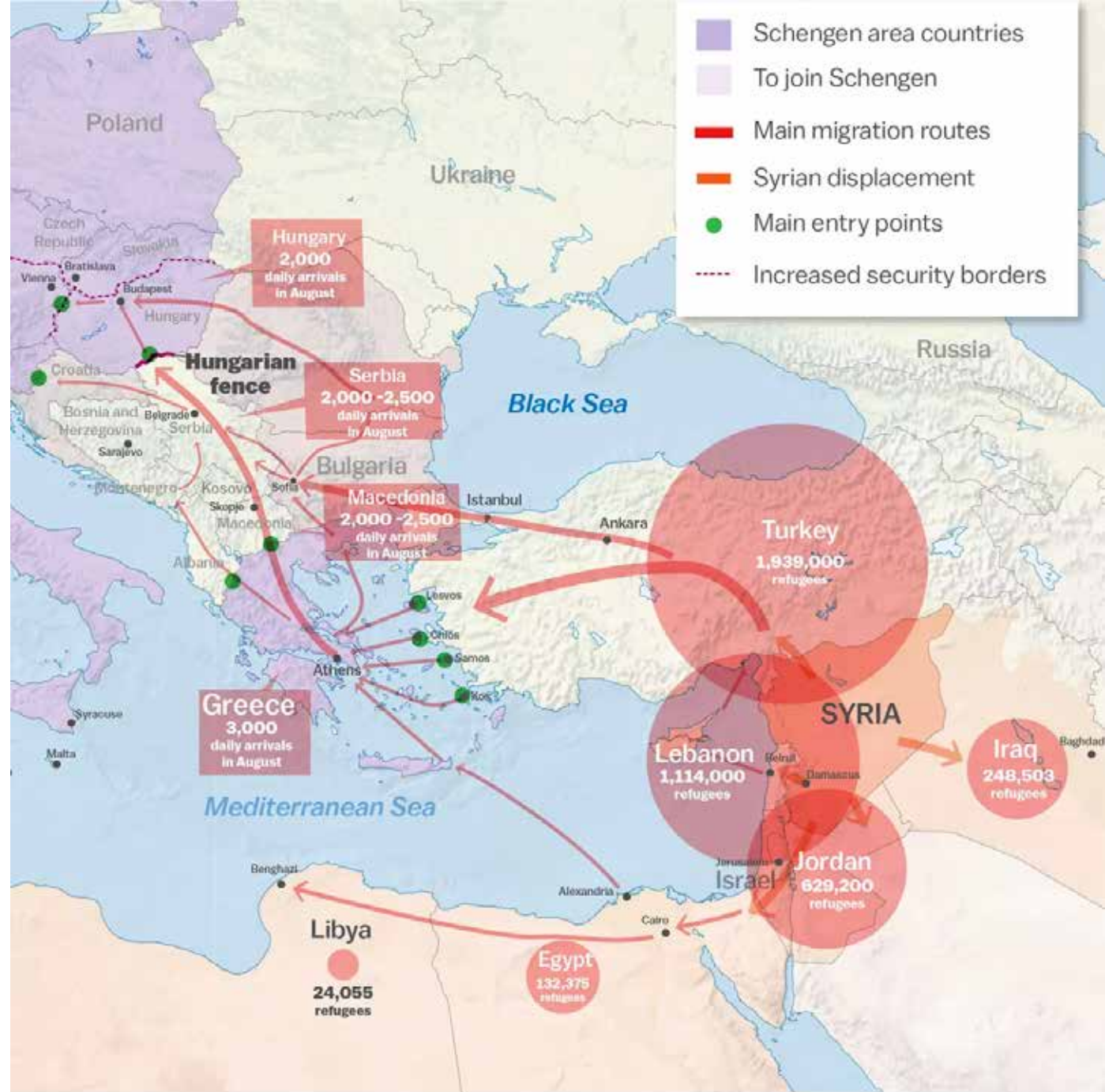


*UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East has provided health care, emergency aid and schooling to Palestinians since 1950

Art in Context

Palestinian Exodus of 1948, also known as the **Nakba**, or “catastrophe”, occurred upon the creation of the state of Israel. During this time, over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes. About 110,000 Palestinians fled to Lebanon where they continue to live with limited rights and unclear official status.

In March of 2011, violent Syrian government crackdowns erupted to stop public anti-government demonstrations. The violence in the country made daily life very challenging with lack of food, medical care and basic necessities. Many homes and businesses were destroyed and Syrians began to flee. And estimated 6.6 million Syrians fled to neighboring countries to seek asylum as refugees, over 1,000,000 of whom sought refuge in Lebanon.



Syrian Refugees
4,087,139 people

Syrian Internally Displaced People
7,632,500 people

12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria



Life in the refugee camps is hard. Most refugees live in poverty, with high unemployment rates and uneven access to education and basic services. Samira was born in and her family has lived for generations in the Burj El Barajneh urban Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon that is pictured here.

Visual Arts Vocabulary

PORTRAIT: a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person

DOCUMENTARY: a film or photograph based on or re-creating an actual event, era, life story, etc., that purports to be factually accurate and contains no fictional elements; a form of photography used to chronicle events or environments both significant and relevant to history and historical events as well as everyday life

SUBJECT: the main figure or object of most prominence and importance in the image

BACKGROUND: the part of a scene or picture that is farthest from the viewer, behind the subject, main figure or object

MOOD: the emotional feeling of the subject or atmosphere as expressed through visual information

Social Studies Vocabulary

ARAB SPRING: Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring refers to the series of protests and major uprisings as the response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living in some Arab countries. The initial wave of revolutions and protests faded by mid-2012, but many demonstrations were met with violent responses from authorities, and another wave of counter-protests. Large-scale conflicts born as a response include the Syrian Civil War, Iraqi insurgency and civil war, Egyptian crisis and coup, Lybian Civil War, and Yemen Crisis and civil war

REFUGEE: a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster

DISPLACEMENT: the movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters

MIGRATION: Migration can be used for the journey from one place to another or for the act of movement

ASYLUM: the protection granted by a nation to someone who has left their native country as a political refugee

Additional Resources

Exhibition Catalogue: The Shape of Birds. Newport Art Museum exhibition catalogue.
MORE

Website: www.raniamatar.com
Learn more about Rania Matar's work.

Website: United Nations Refugee Agency <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html>
This website offers extensive information and educational resources appropriate for students aged 9-18

Website: The Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island
<https://diiri.org/>

DIIRI works to empower refugees and immigrants in the community by providing vital programs and services for legal aid and representation for citizenship and immigration, refugee resettlement, education, and more to help the people it serves to thrive and be successful.

Website: The Refugee Dream Center
<http://www.refugeedreamcenter.org/>
The Refugee Dream Center targets and fills gaps for refugees in Rhode Island who no longer receive federally funded assistance.

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon website: <https://www.paljourneys.org/en/timeline/highlight/6590/palestinian-refugees-lebanon>
Anera Refugee Support Organization website: <https://www.nera.org/stories/burj-el-barajneh-palestinian-refugee-camp-lebanon/>

Credits

Middle East map Source: Encyclopedia britannica <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria>

Syrian Refugee Migration map source: Source: <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/27/9394959/syria-refugee-map>
Sep 27, 2015, 10:00am EDT

Image of Fleeing Palestinians: <https://thepalestineproject.medium.com/quick-facts-the-palestinian-nakba-of-1948-3c715629b010>

Map of Palestinian Refugee movements: <https://theglobepost.com/2017/12/26/palestine-homeland-generation/>

Palestinian Refugee Camp image:
<https://www.nera.org/stories/super-mom-burj-el-barajneh-lebanon/>