

Alan Kurdi, the Syrian Hector: Connecting the landscapes of a refugee crisis

By Nadine Saliba

you broke the ocean in
half to be here.
only to meet nothing that wants you.

— *Immigrant* by Nayyirah Waheed

In July 2015, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center hosted Liliana Wilson's exhibit *Ofrenda*. Several of Wilson's paintings dealt with the question of immigration and displacement at a time when images of migrants and refugees flash across our TV and computer screens in news reports covering what has been called "the worst refugee crisis since World War II."

Yet, every morning, the sun rises stretching its arms from behind solemn clouds, indifferent to the bloated bodies washing ashore. In arresting this historical moment as though a still frame from a story unfolding, Liliana's art kneads an emotional response in the bowl of the stomach, providing refuge from indifference.

One piece at the exhibit stood out for me more than any other. It caught my eye as soon as I walked into the Esperanza on that hot July evening. It was a large painting featuring a woman and a boy in the clutches of two men - dressed in suits and ties and sporting fish heads - pushing them into blood-red waters. Eerily reminiscent of the images and stories crowding my Facebook timeline of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, it reached out to me like a hungry lover.

I squeezed past a small group that had already gathered in front of the painting, chatting lazily with the polite smiles of old acquaintances. Printed in bold black on the little white card hang-

ing by its side was the title of the piece, "Greed 2," and the year it was painted, 2003. That infamous year of the US invasion of Iraq seemed now like a lifetime of political defeats, dreams and disappointments away. Yet the painting reeked of the sweat of a breathing tragedy. "Greed 2" might have been over a decade old, but in my world, its paintbrush was dipped in a gushing wound. I saw that night my beloved Mediterranean a funeral canvas hanging on the wall at the Esperanza. People have been struggling to render this event in words worthy of the tragedy. Yet there it was, this violent political moment half way across the world with the sea as co-conspirator staring back at me, packing a visceral punch.

In a report published in June 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned that "Wars, conflict and persecution have forced more people than at any other time since records began to flee their homes and seek refuge and safety elsewhere." The report outlines the increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced people region by region. From the Americas to the middle east and North Africa, the number of refugees, internally displaced and those seeking asylum is on the rise (1 in every 122 humans globally). There are 60 million forcibly displaced people. "If this were the population of a country, it would be the world's 24th biggest," declared the report. Perhaps the most alarming finding is that more than half of the world's refugees are children.

The main reason behind this unprecedented rise in the number of refugees is the war in Syria, now the world's "single largest driver of displacement," as the UNHCR report states. Over 300,000 have been killed in the Syrian war and countless others

Artwork by Liliana Wilson, "Greed 2"



detained and disappeared. Eight million have become internally displaced and 4 million have fled the country, together they make up about half of the Syrian population. Today, the middle east is both the largest producer and host of refugees worldwide. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees have been hosted in countries around Syria such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan where many of them live in terrible conditions housed in plastic tents that fail to protect them against the elements. They endure poverty, hunger and inadequate services from clean water and sanitation to health care and education for their children.

Quarter of a million Syrian refugees has gone to Europe. They have done so by embarking on a danger-filled odyssey through seven countries by boat, train and foot and in the locked backs of trucks. Smugglers and human traffickers in Turkey's coastal cities charge Syrians thousands of dollars for a dangerous journey to Greece aboard packed rubber dinghies that often sail in poor weather conditions. If they are fortunate enough to make it to Greece, they move north to Macedonia and from Macedonia to Serbia then to Hungary and Austria before they get to Germany, a preferred destination for many. It is not uncommon for refugees along the way to be attacked by the police who try to prevent them from continuing their journey.

In the meantime, the US has hosted a little more than 2,000 Syrian refugees since 2012 and the plan to host 10,000 more has come under fire from certain politicians and media outlets.

According to the United Nations, the Syrian refugee crisis is "the greatest humanitarian crisis of our era." However, as so many Syrians are keen to point out, it is not enough to address the refugee crisis strictly as a humanitarian one, rather it is necessary to redress the political roots of the problem and to stop the war fueling this exodus. As one 13-year-old Syrian refugee stranded in a train station in Hungary said in response to the hostile treatment Syrians have received at the hands of the police in several European nations: "You just stop the war and we don't want to go to Europe. Just stop the war in Syria, just that." Of course his pleas fall on deaf ears given the increasing impunity of the parties engaged in the conflict and the culpability of their regional and international backers. Today however, the humanitarian effort to help Syrians is failing as aid money keeps dwindling and humanitarian assistance is severely cut. On the political front, there are no indications of a political solution that would put an end to the Syrian tragedy.

The conflict in Syria began in 2011 when a protest movement against the Syrian regime emerged coinciding with the anti-regime uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. The protests, which were mostly peaceful at the beginning, were met with a brutal crackdown as regime forces arrested, tortured and killed protesters and activists. Eventually Syrians took up arms to protect themselves against the state violence unleashed upon them and they were joined by defecting members of the military. Gradually, the conflict developed into a full scale war as more armed groups emerged. Many of these groups were Islamist in character with varying degrees of radicalization. Al-Qaeda established its branch in Syria called al-Nusra Front and foreign fighters poured in.

The Syrian opposition received varying degrees of political,

financial and military support from Gulf regimes like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Western countries like the US, France and England and from Turkey. The Syrian regime too has been supported and propped up by international and regional allies, namely Russia, Iran and the armed wing of the Lebanese party Hezbollah.

There is so much that can be written about the conflict in Syria that it would warrant a separate article. Suffice it to say, the Syrian uprising for freedom and dignity, as its early activists and organizers liked to call it, devolved into a proxy war for regional



Photo Credit: Nilufer Demir, DHA/AP Photo

dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran with support from international powers on both sides. Most devastatingly perhaps, the conflict has taken on a sectarian character, while the voices of civil society, non-violent activists who chanted "one, one, one, the Syrian people are one" in their protests have been crushed from both sides. It is important to point out however for the sake of historical accuracy that this apocalyptic process was set in motion by the regime's early decision to mete out a military response to its citizens' legitimate protests and demands for much needed political reforms.

This sectarian rift in Syria and in the region at large was precipitated in no small measure by the US invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration's policies and conduct in the years that followed the invasion, from establishing a sectarian political system in the country to supporting sectarian forces and parties that eventually came to power, further exacerbated these divisions. Even the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which appeared on the Syrian scene in 2013 is the offspring of al-Qaida in Iraq, an organization that emerged under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation of that country.

ISIS has taken the lion's share of media coverage in terms of the atrocities and war crimes it has committed in Syria and elsewhere, but according to human rights organizations, the majority of Syrians are fleeing due to regime bombing. The regime's air power is able to unleash more mayhem and devastation than any of the opposition armed groups no matter how violent and despicable some of them are. Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury described in a recent article life in Syrian cities under regime fire as a prison where, "a person has to walk in-between the drops of pouring

death to survive.” According to UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura: “All evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of the civilian victims in the Syrian conflict have been caused by the use of such indiscriminate aerial weapons.”

Keep in mind however that today, the regime is not the only party bombing Syrians from the sky. There is also the US-led coalition against ISIS and the Russian air campaign against ISIS and other opposition groups. Given all that, desperate Syrians are “choosing death by drowning over remaining in the firing line of this war,” as Syrian writer Samar Yazbek put it.

Although particularly hard-hit, the middle east is not the only region that has been in the throes of an immigration and refugee crisis. In the summer of 2014, South Texas saw a surge in the number of Central American migrants - including mothers, children and unaccompanied minors - trying to cross the US-Mexico border.

Some migrants are driven by economic hardship and are seeking a better life in the US. Others however are fleeing violence, death threats, extortion and forced recruitment by criminals and gangs. This situation has prompted some human rights organizations to call this phenomenon forced migration and the people



Artwork by Liliana Wilson, “Hector’s Dream”

escaping these conditions refugees as opposed to immigrants. The UNHCR report stated that “With more people fleeing gang violence or other forms of persecution in Central America, the United States saw 36,800 more asylum claims [in 2014] than in 2013, representing a growth of 44 per cent.”

Some Central American migrants pay smugglers to bring them to the US. Many however are too poor to pay so they cross Mexico by jumping aboard moving freight trains dubbed La Bestia or the train of death. Some fall off these trains or are pushed over and end up with serious injuries and amputations if they survive. This treacherous ride takes them to the unforgiving desert along the US-Mexico border where they try to cross into Texas by foot. Thousands of migrants disappear along the way, they are murdered, abducted or subjected to rape and sexual slavery by human traffickers. Others simply die in the harsh terrain of South Texas as they walk for days, sometimes without

food or water. This is not a travel itinerary; this is an escape route by people for whom this merciless journey with all its risks is still safer than staying put.

In “Hector’s Dreams,” a painting from a series entitled “Lost Children” about kids coming from Central America, Liliana Wilson depicts a full moon shining on a boy dressed in white pants and shirt lying peacefully on the desert floor with his eyes closed and a bee on a petal of a giant tulip growing by his little bare feet. In an interview with the San Antonio Express News, Wilson said the painting could be interpreted in two ways. It’s either that Hector is sleeping and “he’s going to get up and... be OK,” or he “died in the desert and that’s it.” Battling despair, Wilson insists at the end that Hector could be just dreaming, after all, she points out, “there’s no tulips in the desert.” Art affords us this merciful ambiguity that could guard against surrendering to utter despair.

An ocean and a continent away from the US-Mexico border, where the Mediterranean Sea delineates Europe’s frontier to the south with Africa and Asia, the world saw on September 2, 2015 a photo of a lifeless little body on a Turkish beach spit out from the bowels of the water. The boy dressed in navy blue shorts, a red shirt and perfect little baby shoes was Alan Kurdi. The three year old Kurdish Syrian child drowned that day along with his brother and mother while trying to cross the sea from Turkey to Greece on an overcrowded dinghy hoping to reach safety in Europe. Alan was one of 3,770 immigrants and refugees estimated to have died that year trying to cross the Mediterranean on their way to Europe.

Alan and Hector echo each other’s stories along the brutal borderlands between privilege and desolation. Their short lives connect the geographies of forced migration along the lines of shared human suffering amid the precedence of political interests and economic exploitation and the determination to reach for the promise of safety and the life they deserved.

Political borders often coincide with the dividing line delineating global inequality where the conflicts, contradictions and tensions of a hierarchically-structured world come into sharp focus. It is a fault line between the wealth of the world’s dominant economies in North America and Western Europe and the poverty of the Third World. A fortified border, whether between the US and Mexico or Europe and the middle east and North Africa, represents the effort by countries of the North to detect, detain, deport and deter the undesirables, the hordes, to keep the barbarians out when their economies no longer need ‘guest workers’. It’s a border open for business and the free flow of goods, money and weapons but not for desperate human beings. As Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif said: “The refugee story encompasses all the issues that inform our world today: the geopolitics, the history, the trade in violence and instruments of violence...” The immigration crisis is a window into a crisis in North-South relations precipitated not only by gross inequalities and the economic policies at their root but also by geopolitical meddling and outright military interventions of world powers in the affairs of vulnerable states. The North-South borderland here, as there, is the geography of the ‘wretched of the earth’.

Bio: Nadine Saliba is an Arab American activist born in Lebanon who immigrated with her family to San Antonio.