

# courage

## In Jordan's no-man's land, a new beginning for a talented, courageous family

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*A self-taught artist, Yazin taught fellow residents in the no man's land how to draw and paint.*

"I had hoped and hoped, but the moment I heard I was going to Sweden, I could not believe it, really. It suddenly made everything worthwhile."

Today, Yazin's eyes shine with hope. At 29, he has spent almost his entire life in refugee camps. Now he is one of a group of 384 Iranian Kurds who have been accepted for resettlement by Sweden, after spending a year and a half languishing in the no-man's land between Iraq and Jordan.

Yazin was only a child when his family fled the Islamic Revolution in Iran and took refuge with relatives on the other side of the border, in the northern Iraqi town of Sulaymaniyah. They stayed there for two years before moving to the refugee camp of Al Tash, close to Baghdad.

The Al Tash camp was to be Yazin's home for the next two decades. At the age of eight, the little boy discovered his own way of escaping from his grim surroundings: he started drawing and painting. In the absence of any creative classes or workshops, he had to teach himself to paint – and painting was not a normal thing to do in those days: "People here are just trying to survive, so why paint?", they would ask him. But little Yazin knew what he wanted to do, and he had both the will and the courage to follow his dream. In fact, he became so good that many of the other refugees started to ask for portraits.

Little by little, painting became a way of life – and offered a tenuous lifeline of hope. "It's what helped me through the difficulties of life for all those years," he says.

After the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, like many of the 12,000 Iranian Kurds then living in Al Tash, Yazin and his wife and their two children decided to look for a better life elsewhere – but where? "I did not want to return to Iran, because of my different political beliefs," Yazin says. "At the same time, after all those years, I had no more hope in Iraq. As an artist, I felt my soul was dying, surrounded by desperate people inside the camps." The family chose Jordan. But they made it no further than the no-man's land between Iraq and its neighbour.

This time Jordan, despite having shown much hospitality to refugees over the years, refused to let them in, and the group of more than 1,000 people found themselves stranded in the no-man's land between the frontiers. It is nothing but arid desert – freezing in winter, blazing in the summer, and blinded by frequent sandstorms all year round. Truly, a place that only scorpions and snakes find hospitable.

This desolate spot was to remain Yazin's home for the next 18 months. Life had, yet again, taken a turn for the worse, and yet again it was art that kept him from despair. With the help of UNHCR and the international non-governmental organization CARE, Yazin set up a studio for artists and started teaching other refugees to paint and draw. It provided an opportunity for all of them to unload their misery and express their hopes. "It was a very difficult time," Yazin recalls. "I am grateful that I was given a talent, because amidst all the misery, it allowed me to focus on my art."

Over the past year and a half, UNHCR has advocated very strongly for a solution to be found for the "lost" people at the Jordanian border. But until recently, very few countries had been willing to help the 1,048 people – mainly Iranian Kurds, but also some Palestinians, Iraqis, Sudanese, Egyptians and others – who are stranded there.

UNHCR has submitted some 880 cases for resettlement in countries such as the United States, Australia and the Scandinavian countries, and in June 2004, there was good news for some: Sweden had accepted 384 cases for resettlement, and Yazin was among them. It was a dream come true, especially because his brother-in-law had emigrated there in 1997, and the family had always thought of Sweden as "a free country, without religious problems, without war, where people could actually lead a simple and quiet life."

At the end of 2004 those accepted for resettlement were transferred to the Ruweished camp in Jordan, where the Swedish government conducted orientation briefings. Then, a few weeks later, they set off to begin their new life in Sweden.

Yazin was particularly excited about going to Sweden, because he wants to continue his studies and eventually make a living from his art. "I have found new courage to move on, to start a new life, a real life. Going to Sweden saved me from the no-man's land that was like a prison to me. I felt like a disabled person there. I felt so impotent, not being able to work or provide food for my family. I like to work and support my family and one day, maybe one day, my paintings will become famous, just like the Mona Lisa – who knows?"

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