

Interview with Ghias Aljundi: A British Syrian's Story

This is the full length version of the interview with British Syrian Ghias Aljundi who volunteers on Lesbos to help rescue refugees off the boats travelling between Turkey and Greece. This interview is linked to the Broomberg & Chanarin Learning Guide for Key Stages 3 – 5 inspired by the artists' film *The Bureaucracy of Angels* (2017), an Art on the Underground commission for King's Cross Station.

For more information and for the learning guide visit: <https://art.tfl.gov.uk/projects/the-bureaucracy-of-angels>

Please note that some people may find parts of this interview upsetting.

How do you define yourself?

I'm British from Syrian origin.

When and why did you come to the UK from Syria?

I left Syria in 1998, arrived here in April 1999. And I left for my safety, I was a journalist in Syria and I was at risk with the regime so I had to leave. I was threatened by the regime because of my writing so I had to leave for my safety.

What was your journey like to get here?

It was easier than what is happening now. I first travelled to Moscow, stayed for 5 months there and then I flew to the UK in April 1999. It was not easy at all. In Syria when you are an opponent or journalist you cannot leave the country. You have to have an exit visa. You need to take it from five different secret services and I can define it as one of the most nasty, cruel secret services in the world. So I had to take five permissions to leave the country and at that time I didn't have any. I had five non-permissions, or I wasn't allowed actually, five of them were banning me from travel. So I had to navigate through the Syrian system and I left the country. It was a miracle really. Nobody stopped me as I knew the guy who was checking at the airport and he let me through. I had a passport, very temporary, a two month passport.

Where are your family now? Have any of them stayed in Syria?

My family, most of them are in Syria. I have only one brother in Germany. He came a year and a half ago. He also ran for his safety. Otherwise they are all in Syria. I have five brothers and my mum is still there in Syria. My oldest brother is also in trouble now. He is trying to leave but he is banned from leaving the country so he is also waiting for a miracle to happen. He is constantly threatened by the regime or the regime supporters. Also I have one brother who lives 3km from where ISIS are and they keep bombing the town, attacking the town and slaughtering people. So he's still there as well. I don't know if he's trying to leave or not but it's impossible.

Why do you volunteer in Greece to help rescue refugees off the boats?

It falls within my work. I do human rights work. Usually it's my profession. Once I was watching the news and I saw a boat, on the news, on the BBC. It was sinking in the Mediterranean and I just decided that I had to do something. I had to be helping out and then I just booked my ticket and left two days later to Greece. I felt so involved, as well. I felt this is a human tragedy and I couldn't be a negative or passive witness so I decided to go and volunteer and when I was there I just thought that I took the right decision because not

too many people were helping, so it was important to be there. And it's also about my human nature.

What organisations do you work with? Do you know Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS)?

I worked on my own actually, like many other volunteers who just left their homelands and went there and started volunteering. We were not part of any organisation. Actually there were no big organisations there. So we were individuals who collected money from family or friends and went and helped out. I was aware of MOAS and I know them. They have a presence there, like many other big organisations... The first stage of volunteering we were all 100% individuals and then some of the individuals created their own NGOs – the Norwegians and the Spanish.

While you were out there your brother arrived on a boat. Tell me about this.

My family came. My brother, his wife and my niece, and my sister-in-law as well. I was there. They told me they were coming so I waited for them and it was one of the most difficult experiences I have ever had in my life. But I received them, I took them out of the boat and made sure that they were safe and OK. They carried the journey like other refugees. It was the first time I met my niece, my sister in law and my nephew. I left him when he was a little boy. I took my niece out of the boat but I didn't know she was my niece at all. I was taking all children; I was in the water. And somebody was shouting "this is your niece" and I didn't recognise what was happening until I re-entered myself after the boat was completely unloaded. My sister-in-law was six months pregnant then. She had the baby, a boy called Alex. He is all fine and they live in Germany. They feel safe and looked after.

What kind of journeys have the refugees undertaken to get there?

If you ask a refugee, like I ask, they will tell you it's a journey from hell. It's very difficult, it's like you are a victim of multiple criminals. First you are a victim of the war, like criminal Islamese army groups. So you escape from them and you come to Turkey, and you are then in the hands of the smugglers who are very cruel and very criminal too. So you are played with; your destiny is in the hands of somebody else. This is before getting onto a boat. So you are exploited, your money is taken from you, and you just wait for the unknown. You don't know what is happening. You don't know if the smuggler is lying to you. We have documented so many cases of smugglers taking money who did not send the people on the boat. So you lose your money, your savings or the borrowing you did, and then you're stuck in Izmir or by the sea in Turkey.

This is one way and the other way you are put on a boat, a rubber boat. In a good condition it's good for 10 people but you are on the boat as one of between 50 and 60 people, so people are on top of each other. And the boat is very low in the water as well, so even little waves go into it. Also the smugglers often don't give you enough fuel. So we have saved so many boats from the middle of the sea because, just simply, they run out of fuel. And often little waves will destroy the boat or make it sink. It is terrible, the journey is.

One day I went into the sea to rescue a boat on another refugee boat. I went a few kilometres and I could see people. I could see their feelings there more than I saw it on the beach when they arrive. It's like you are in the hands of nobody; your fate is decided by nature. And many refugees come from areas where there are no rivers or sea, in Syria or in Afghanistan, so they are not good swimmers and also one of the most heart breaking things is that the boats are full of children. It's like you can't decide your destiny or fate. Many people have fallen into the sea. Others are lucky that the rescuers were around or the Navy,

the Greek Navy, but many of them have died as well. They sank, they drowned because they couldn't swim. And nobody, nobody knew about them. So it's very difficult. Actually people come and arrive at the beach terribly traumatised. Later they go back to normal, a little bit.

One of the examples that will stay in my mind forever was when I was taking a little girl who was seven out of a boat. And usually I'm in the water and some volunteers are out of the water, just to make it safe to pass the children. This girl called Zana she clung around my neck. And she said "don't get me back to the sea" and then I couldn't get rid of her hands around my neck, so I went out, I left the boat, as other people were helping out. I tried to dry her and whenever I put her face towards the sea she completely turned round and put her back to the sea. So she didn't want to see the sea. I visited her in the camp the next day and she said to me "I don't want to go to the sea anymore. I hate the sea." But you can imagine they are traumatised as a lot of people shout and scream on the boat because of fear. They are scared and then the children get absolutely traumatised. So this is the journey. The first boat I saw I became like a statue; I lost all my feelings, my senses. I was helping but I couldn't, I was completely off my senses. To see people when they realise that they can stand in the water and they don't want to be in the boat anymore. They just jump, and stand in the water. "Yes we are standing on the land now."

How long do the journeys take and why are a lot of them at night time?

It depends on which way you are going, for example if you are going to the north of Lesbos it's just two and a half hours. If you are going to *Mytilene* it's much longer. To the north of Lesbos it is 6km, the distance between Turkey & Greece, and to *Mytilene* it is 20km. But the problem is these guys they are not sailors. The smuggler chooses a refugee and says "you will drive the boat". So sometimes instead of coming across you go to the other side; so instead of crossing 6km you cross 25km. And there is the risk of you losing your way and running out of fuel. And also if you have a wavy sea and you go to the left, for example, and instead of landing here the boat lands in a different town or different point it can take longer, but usually it's between three and four hours.

Usually the night time is cheaper so you pay less to the smuggler. When I was there I was asking people how much do you pay and they said \$1,200 roughly – sometimes more, sometimes less – but if you come in the night I asked and they said you pay \$800. Secondly when the EU started monitoring the sea the smugglers used the night because they couldn't be found or caught. This later became a habit to come in the night because you couldn't be caught by the EU police or the Greek Navy. But the night journey is a different story. You are double traumatised, as you don't know where you are going. When we were there we saw boats. We have a big light so we flashed for them to come to us, to help them out. But if we, the volunteers, were not there you would not know where to land. They use their mobile lights and sometimes if they are stuck in the sea their mobiles run out of battery as well. It's difficult.

What happens to the boats?

When the boats came, in the first stage, the smugglers were telling people the police might catch you and send you back and they gave them a knife so when they arrived on the beach they immediately stabbed the boat. But later we told them nobody will send you back so don't stab the boat because this was another risk as many times they stabbed the boat on the sea so people fell into the water. It wasn't deep, but imagine. Blow up boats are 95% or more. Sometimes they send very old wooden boats and this is more disastrous, as they have more accidents; they capsize all of them. On the rubber boats you have 50. But on the

wooden boats you have 250. And one of the wooden boats sank down and people couldn't get out. So with a rubber boat you stay on the surface. But the wooden one it went down and people were stuck inside their rooms. And most of the wooden boats I've seen were very old. Even a little kid would break them.

What happens to the refugees once they arrive?

Until last year we received them, unloaded them, and gave them changes of dry clothes and food – a drink and a biscuit. And then we took them to the camp. There's a camp, but it's not the same now. It's called Moria, a reception camp. It's a very notorious camp now. And they go there and they register, to get an expulsion paper called a Khartiya, which is a document showing that they can only stay for 30 days in Greece.. And they have to leave Greece in 30 days. The next day you go to the ferry at Athena, Macedonia and you carry on to Western Europe. From March 2016 the EU had an agreement with Turkey, so they closed the Balkan route as they call it, so Macedonia closed their borders and now people are stuck in Greece. You are stuck on the island. So if a boat comes the volunteers or the Navy will take you to the Moria camp and you're kept there until the police decide to let you go to Athens. Sometimes six months, sometimes eight. On my last trip to Moria I saw somebody who has been there for nine months. They are kept there. Many of them are forced to apply for asylum in Greece now. Special nationalities like the Syrians are usually allowed to apply, but there are also many people who are returned like the Pakistanis, the Afghanis, some Africans, and Libyans. They are sent back to Turkey. They are saying Turkey is a safe country!

Tell me about an individual you have met and their journey.

I will tell you about a hero I met. He's a 60 year old Algerian guy. And he used to be a weight lifter and then his boat sank down. He swam to the beach for 6 hours and told the Navy that the boat had sunk down, and he took the Navy back and they rescued people. He swam for 6 hours and he arrived! There were only two casualties but he saved the vast majority of people.

I have established very, very close connections to the families not only in Greece but in Europe as well. I have stayed in touch, not with everybody, but some families who I have helped. Some people have moved to Athens, as they couldn't complete their journey. So I've been going regularly to the city and helping in the buildings. So there's some strong connections between me and them. And there's very trustworthy relations between us.

Why do you think some people choose to stay in their home country in such dangerous situations?

For two reasons. Some people have hope that things will finish – now, tomorrow, after tomorrow – so they keep hoping, and they are aware of how difficult it is to be a refugee, how difficult to be uprooted from your homeland and how difficult to be in a different culture, a different weather, so they don't want to leave. Some people they can't leave, they have no possibility. If you see the Syrians who left to go to Greece they are a very tiny percentage. It's not a big percentage like they are describing. It's very tiny. We have inside Syria four and a half million displaced. My town is a very small town. It's called Tartus, and it has one and a half million, this town only. So people think OK if we go and live in a tent inside Syria, in a relatively safe area, things might improve and we can go back. But some people cannot go as they have no money, they have no possibilities and they want to leave. I know so many people they want to leave for their children, for their future but most importantly for their safety. But they cannot and also now if you take Syria as an example, Syria is surrounded by countries with closed borders. They can't go to Turkey easily, they can't go to Jordan easily,

they can't go to Iraq easily and Lebanon is also closed. So they are forcibly staying but there are so many people who also don't want to go, they don't want to leave. For example my brother. The French gave him a visa three years ago but he said no, things will improve, things will improve but now he's trying to leave because things didn't improve.

How do you feel about the Spanish firemen Manuel Blanco, Enrique Rodríguez and Julio Latorre who have been arrested for smuggling when they were volunteering to save refugees from drowning?

I knew the guys extremely well. They are pure humans, they have been sacrificing their lives, their time and their money to help people. They are not smugglers and these guys would have reported any smugglers to the police if they found them. Carrying weapons? This is a lie. I went on the boat with them the day before they were arrested and had I seen any weapons I would have reported them. This is a red line for me. It's impossible. They are on bail but they were allowed to leave to go back to Spain. They are now in Spain. They immediately left here. They paid €5,000 as bail and then they left. It's impossible they had weapons. I would find it so strange. I've been on their boat... The problem is when they were arrested the EU was putting pressure on Greece to crack down on volunteers. They thought if we're helping, people will keep coming. The day before they arrested them I was on Lesbos and the police came and arrested us horribly. They were not with me, but we were a group of other people, and they said "if we come back and we find your feet in the water we arrest you". And I said "but Greece is a tourist country so I'm swimming", I took my T-shirt off, "I'm going swimming". And he was taken aback, "oh yeah!" Then he changed it to "when a boat comes, if you are in the water I'll arrest you"... They were very good. We all worked with them. We all knew them. They were poor as well. If you were a smuggler you would not be poor, you'd be rich. To be honest if they were smugglers I would have reported them. Literally me and a Dutch journalist we took a smuggler to the police station. The Dutch journalist was working with this guy, so she reported him and he was prosecuted.

Do you feel that the media is reporting in an unbiased way?

No, the media is not giving enough information. The media is ill-informing people usually. The media is calling them migrants when they are not migrants. I've met tens of thousands of them and I've found few migrants among these refugees, really a few. So they are not migrants. At least let's be fair about my experience. At least 90% of people that I've seen, who I've met, who I've talked to they are immigrants who have fled for their safety... Secondly, the media is not talking about the source of the crisis. All they are focusing on is, "oh we are invaded in Europe" but they are not talking about the war in Syria. People from Afghanistan, excuse me, they have been bombarded by many countries since 2001. Destroyed houses, no infrastructure, no future, no safety, nothing and the media say "oh, why did the Afghans come in?" The Afghans are coming here. So OK there is a war – we need to deal with that. We need to tackle the source. All we are talking about is, "oh wow we are swamped in Europe by refugees". You take the Guardian for example in this country and maybe the Independent they did some good positive work but also it's not enough, they were selective. So the only people actually who have taken the reality out is the volunteers – we wrote, we published videos. Otherwise the media is not neutral and it's not positive at all, or objective let's say. You don't have to be positive, it's not objective.

What do you think the hardest thing is about being a refugee?

The hardest thing is when you are forced to go and mix in a different culture and a different country. When you leave your roots behind, and you find it so difficult to have roots in the new place, at your destination. It's not like somebody who married a woman and came with her, or a man let's say. It's forced and when you are forced to leave it's impossible to settle,

at least in your brain. So it's difficult especially if you've come from countries in the Middle East, as you don't speak the language. It's absolutely 100% a different culture. And you always have the feeling of being a stranger or in the current climate, a political climate, you feel you are a parasite. Some people told me in Germany "we feel like we are parasites here." It is very difficult. And you always have this feeling "I want to go back home". So you're not settled here and you're not settled there. And also it is dividing families. I was lucky I don't have this problem, I dealt with it properly. But the vast majority they are still divided, their families are there and they are here. They cannot settle. They just want to go back. They want to see their family. And these big barriers are like you are in prison. Even though you are not, but like in prison you can't see your family. But it's what's happening. It's difficult to be uprooted from where you grew up... I know somebody who just left Germany, to go back to Syria. He said "I don't want to be in a place where I don't feel I'm welcomed". Even in Germany where you are welcomed, two or three experiences make you feel no I'm not welcome. It's difficult for people to rebuild their lives especially for so many of the refugees who are old enough to not be able to start from the beginning, a new language and a new culture. It's a difficult story.

Do the refugees feel like the government is checking up on them, like they are being watched?

First of all when they are interviewed they are already asked too many private questions and they feel, hold on, no need. And then people, especially people coming from the Middle East they think because of the events in Europe, the terrorism and stuff, they feel I'm vulnerable and I'm being spied on or watched, so people are very anxious about that as well. When you travel in the airport you are asked different questions to another British man coming at the same time... I'm stopped regularly, but I'm different, I'm lucky. I speak good English and I'm confident and I'm known in the area I'm working in. They know what I do and they still stop me. But imagine, these people are vulnerable, they have just arrived. I have a British passport so they cannot send me back anywhere, they can't get rid of me... But some people feel when they travel on refugee travel documents, even my neighbours, that there's a big sense of surveillance among refugees.

What are your hopes for the future, for example with immigration policies?

My hope is and my new job will be to lobby for more fairness with Amnesty International. I'm running the refugee campaign to make the UK government take more refugees or deal in better policies. For example they have something called fast-track, with some case owners and if I don't like you, you don't convince me, you are rejected. There must be fairer policies here. More resources for example. When you are here the government is not paying enough money for you to learn English. This is in the UK but the Germans give you a proper course. When they discuss refugee integration the politicians say they need to know, they need to learn English! I used to run an integration project until 2010, but when David Cameron took over he immediately stopped it. I was made redundant even, because of that. That time we brought refugees to meet mentors, like English or British people who are settled here or born here, and the refugees learn the language, then the culture, they learn about Christmas, they learn about Easter, they learn about everything, the values – what do they call it the 'British values'. They stopped this but if you don't have this scheme you come here and you stay within your four walls. If you don't have the possibility to go and learn, for example with an English lady – I was so lucky – how can you settle down? How can you integrate? So more resources should be put in to integrate the refugees. And then integration is mutual, it is not only the refugees that have to integrate. And when the refugee integrates the benefit is very mutual. I have been here for 19 years nearly, paying tax all my life here. I am working. It helps. So this is what I want to see in this country again. Not to show but also to tackle the

media approach here – the Daily Mail, the Daily Star, the Daily Telegraph, and The Sun – describing the refugees as our enemies, when they are contributing to our country so well. Policies should be changed in the UK and even in Europe. Refugees should be separated from elections. You don't use immigration to be elected, to play on people's fears! This is what I'd like to see. I believe that the UK and other EU countries must give a safe passage to affected refugees rather than letting them die in the sea.

What about the 'safe return review' and the UK's changed policy so that after five years if they decide your country is safe you are not allowed to stay, whereas before you could apply for indefinite asylum?

This is very cruel, after five years; imagine you came here in 2011 and had two children. Your two children learn English, the school system, everything. 90% of the children don't know Arabic even when they come here, or they lose it. And then they send you back to Syria, for example, or wherever. They are re-uprooting you. You were already uprooted from your own country, and you come here and you're settled, and you're uprooted again. So you go back and you have to start from the beginning. Sometimes also the judgement on the safe country it's subjective. For England or the UK government Egypt is a safe country, Pakistan is a safe country. Egypt is one of the most dangerous countries now for journalists and human rights defenders and activists. But if you are Egyptians you are refused because Egypt is a safe country. It is always political. From my point of view it is very cruel, it is very inhuman.

Ghias then watched 'The Bureaucracy of Angels' and was moved by the film. We had an unrecorded discussion about the faces swathed in gold and he said how familiar it all was to him. He said that the refugees were Libyans, then he pointed out the old boats and that people get trapped inside the cabins. We discussed the Arabic writing on the boats and he explained the symbols (the star of Mohammad and the arrow with the evil eye).



Image taken from <http://bit.ly/2eKUyLE>

This webpage contains more information about the island of Lesbos.

This interview was conducted by Rachel Moss, Learning Guide Writer (Freelance post) for A New Direction.