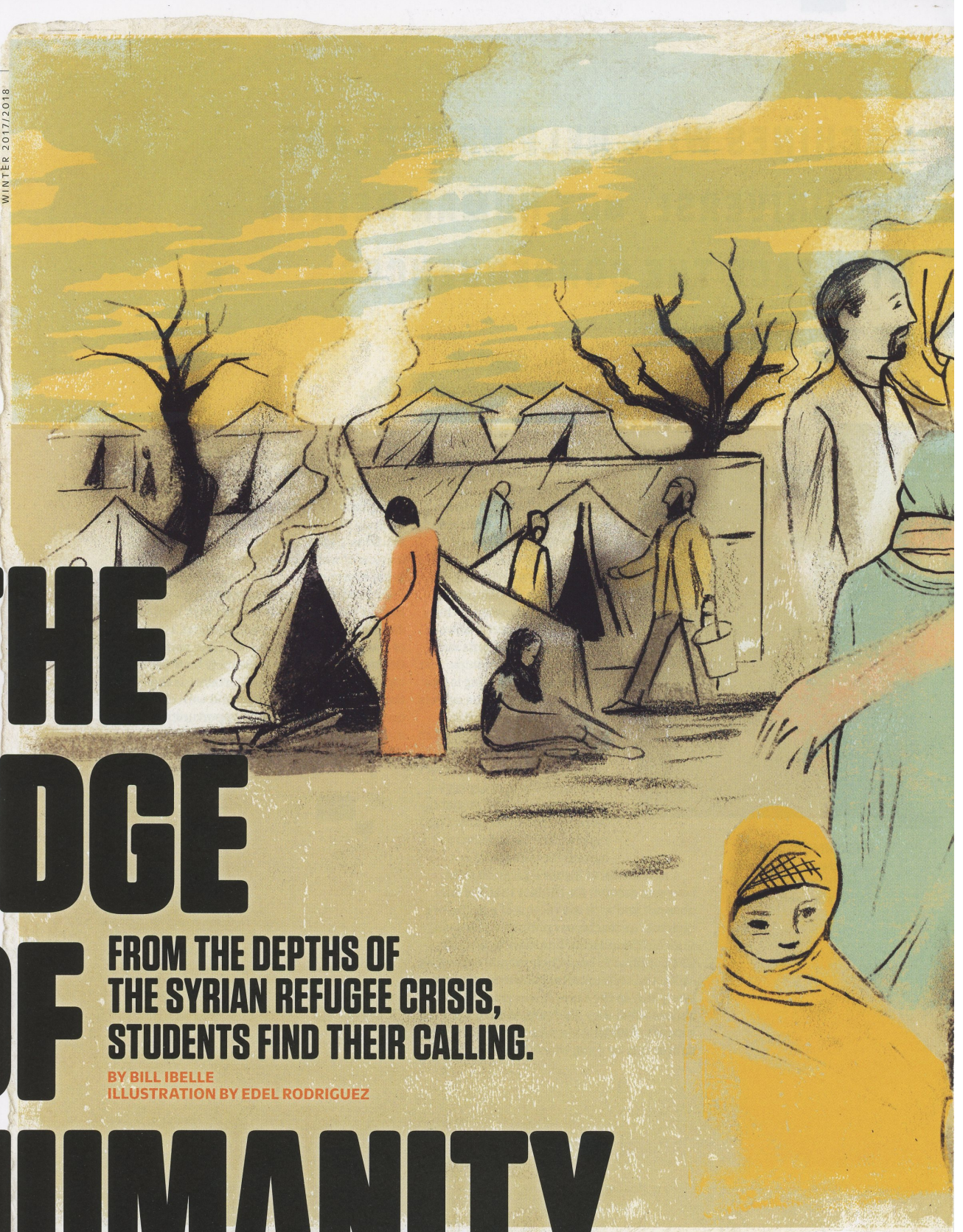


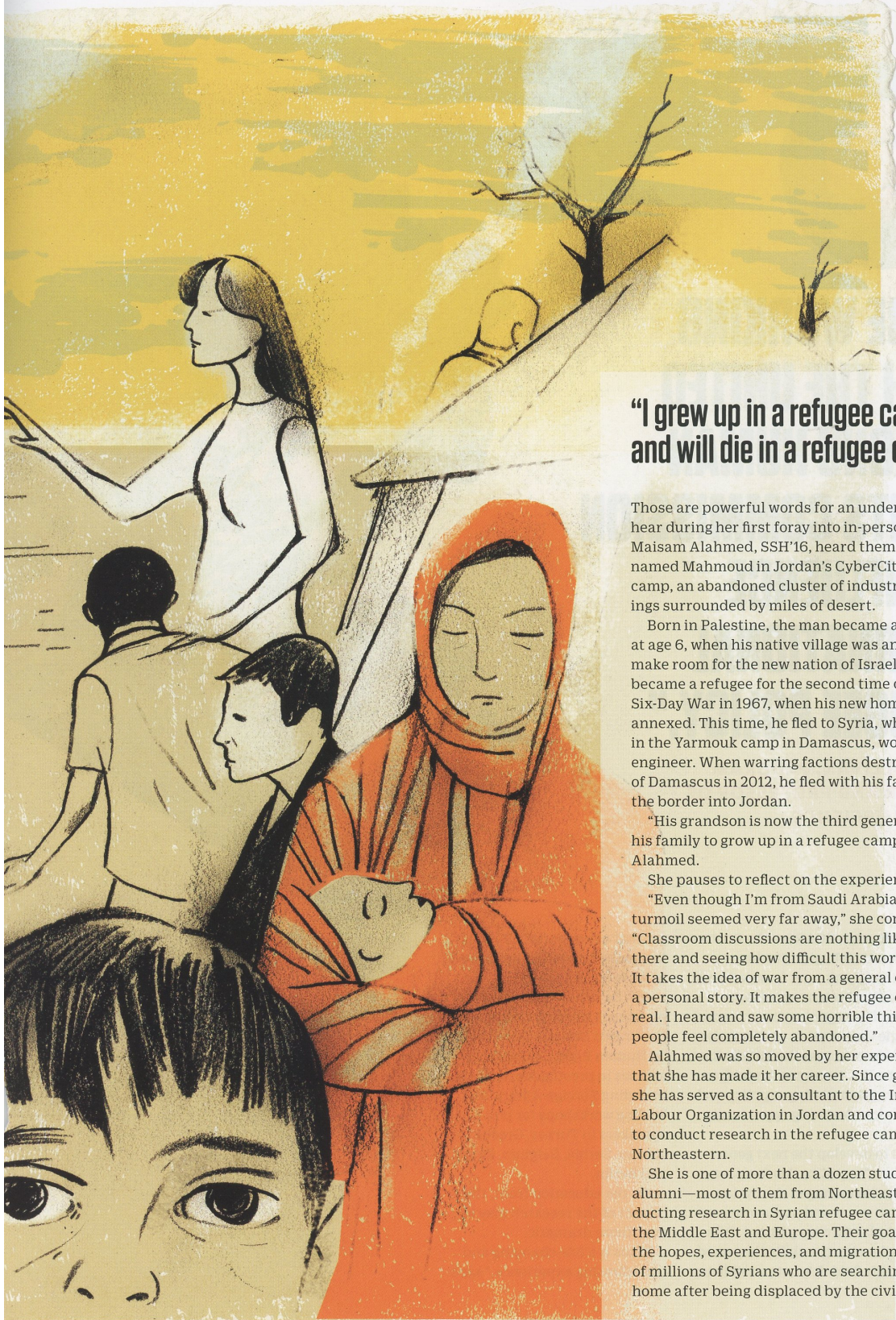
WINTER 2017/2018

THE EDGE OF HUMANITY

FROM THE DEPTHS OF
THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS,
STUDENTS FIND THEIR CALLING.

BY BILL IBELLE
ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ





“I grew up in a refugee camp and will die in a refugee camp.”

Those are powerful words for an undergraduate to hear during her first foray into in-person research. Maisam Alahmed, SSH'16, heard them from a man named Mahmoud in Jordan's CyberCity refugee camp, an abandoned cluster of industrial buildings surrounded by miles of desert.

Born in Palestine, the man became a refugee at age 6, when his native village was annexed to make room for the new nation of Israel in 1948. He became a refugee for the second time during the Six-Day War in 1967, when his new home was also annexed. This time, he fled to Syria, where he lived in the Yarmouk camp in Damascus, working as an engineer. When warring factions destroyed much of Damascus in 2012, he fled with his family across the border into Jordan.

“His grandson is now the third generation of his family to grow up in a refugee camp,” says Alahmed.

She pauses to reflect on the experience.

“Even though I'm from Saudi Arabia, all this turmoil seemed very far away,” she continues. “Classroom discussions are nothing like being there and seeing how difficult this world can be. It takes the idea of war from a general concept to a personal story. It makes the refugee crisis very real. I heard and saw some horrible things. These people feel completely abandoned.”

Alahmed was so moved by her experience that she has made it her career. Since graduation, she has served as a consultant to the International Labour Organization in Jordan and continues to conduct research in the refugee camps for Northeastern.

She is one of more than a dozen students and alumni—most of them from Northeastern—conducting research in Syrian refugee camps across the Middle East and Europe. Their goal is to track the hopes, experiences, and migration patterns of millions of Syrians who are searching for a new home after being displaced by the civil war.



“WE’RE WORKING WITH THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION TO INFLUENCE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE POLICY.”

—DENIS SULLIVAN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR AND PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

They work through BCARS— the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies—a Northeastern-led think tank founded and directed by political science professor Denis Sullivan. The organization is funded by the Carnegie Corporation and includes 13 universities from across the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S. Its aim is twofold: to influence international refugee policy and to provide a unique learning opportunity for students.

“Our goal is to develop the next generation of scholars,” says Charles Simpson, SSH’14, MS’15, who managed the Syrian program for two years and now serves on the BCARS Scholar Advisory Board. “We help students develop the skills they need to move up in this field. It’s not possible to

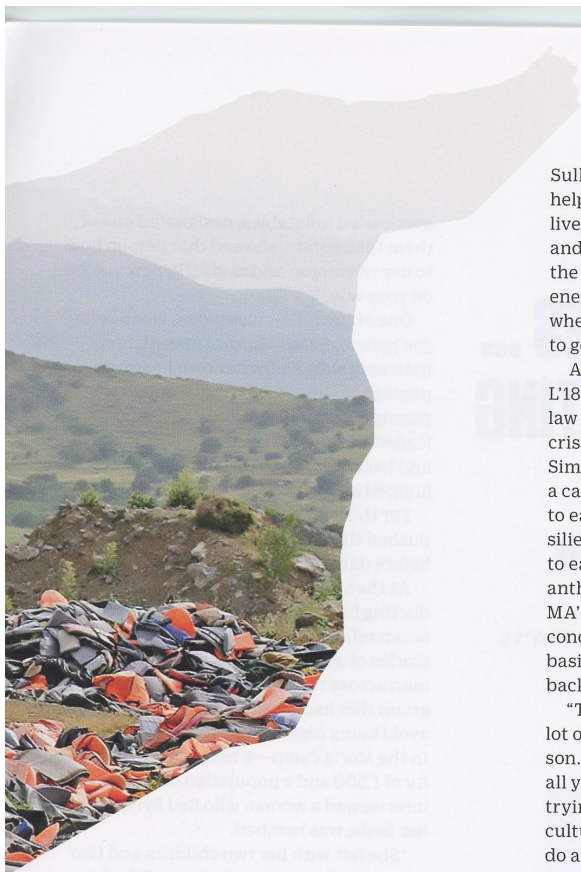
get that experience in Boston. You really have to be immersed in it overseas.”

On the policy front, the organization is working closely with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, publishing articles in prestigious journals, including *Foreign Affairs*, and leading workshops for policymakers in Turkey, Greece, Jordan, Serbia, Belgium, Egypt, and Berlin.

On the education front, the impact of the research may be even more dramatic.

“This is a life-changing and life-affirming experience,” says





ALEX TARZIKHAN looks out over the Lifejacket Graveyard on the Greek island of Lesbos, which commemorates the hundreds of refugees who have died at sea.

“I THOUGHT HE WAS IN HIS 70S, AND WHEN HE TOLD ME HE WAS JUST 48, I HAD TO ASK AGAIN.”

—ALEX TARZIKHAN, BHS’15, L’18



Sullivan. “Their research is helping the U.N. improve its delivery of humanitarian services, and the students come back to the classroom with renewed energy and a clearer sense of where they want their careers to go.”

Alexandra Tarzikhan, BHS’15, L’18, shifted from premed to law to address the refugee crisis from a legal perspective. Simpson changed his plans for a career in the Foreign Service to earn a master’s in social resilience, and he’s now planning to earn his doctorate in political anthropology. Lisa Schmitz, MA’16, is using the research she conducted in the camps as the basis for her doctoral thesis back in her native Germany.

“This kind of work requires a lot of improvisation,” says Simpson. “You can train someone all you want, but when you’re trying to deal with all kinds of cultural nuances, you’ve got to do a lot of adapting and thinking on your feet.”

Simpson should know. He

joined the program while earning his master’s degree in security and social resilience, conducted research in Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp, and then served as the assistant director of BCARS for two years following graduation.

He said that in addition to language skills, the organization looks for students who are personable, adaptable, and can work with little structure.

“They have to be comfortable taking two buses, walking to the outskirts of camp, and talking to random people to gain access and identify the informal leaders,” he says. “The challenge is when they realize how messy primary research can be. As an undergraduate, you read articles, and there seems to be an objective truth. But in this project, they have to make sense of a really chaotic situation where there is no answer key.”

Before the students go abroad, BCARS trains them in personal safety, field-based data collection, research design, and cross-cultural interviewing techniques. In all, the team has conducted more than 180 interviews with refugees, experts, political leaders, and police.

A NARROW ESCAPE

Tarzikhan was raised in the city of Aleppo—ground zero for the Syrian civil war—and narrowly missed the carnage when she came to Northeastern as a freshman in 2011. She began as a premed student, but as the war was heating up back home, she did a paper about the delivery of health services in war zones and fell in love with legal research.

“For my second co-op, I did research for a health-rights clinic in Miami,” says Tarzikhan. “I saw how I could also save lives through law. That was the turning point for me.”

As a result, she decided to pursue a joint master’s through the Northeastern School of Law and the Tufts School of Medicine. It was during her first law school co-op, doing legal research for an NGO in Paris, that she connected with BCARS.

“As a Syrian who was fortunate enough leave at the start of the war, I knew that simply conducting legal research wouldn’t be enough,” she says.

So she arranged to spend a month in Greece, where she conducted interviews for BCARS and volunteered as an interpreter and EMT with the Boat Refugee Foundation on the island of Lesbos.

“These people were making a 50-mile trip by boat, usually at night, across the Aegean Sea,” she says. “The smugglers put them in



“THIS KIND OF WORK REQUIRES ... A LOT OF ADAPTING AND THINKING ON YOUR FEET.”

—CHARLES SIMPSON, SSH'14, MA'15

▼ **WHEN ALEX TARZIKHAN** visited the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, she met a family that crossed the Turkish mountains by foot with border guards shooting at them.



overloaded inflatables, designated one of them the captain, showed that person how to use the motor, and said, ‘OK, now you’re on your way.’”

One of her fellow volunteers was a refugee herself. Sarah Mardini gained international celebrity for her own harrowing passage to Greece. Partway through the passage, the engine failed and the overloaded boat began to take on water. Mardini and her sister, Yusra, an Olympic swimmer, jumped into the choppy nighttime water.

For the next three and a half hours, they pushed the boat, finally reaching Lesbos before dawn.

At the same time, Tarzikhan was conducting interviews for the BCARS project in seven refugee camps in Greece. She heard stories of a group that carried a disabled man across the mountains, and another group that had to shoot a crying baby to avoid being captured by the border patrol. In the Moria camp—a tent city with a capacity of 1,500 and a population of 3,000—she interviewed a woman who fled Syria after her home was bombed.

“She left with her two children and two grandchildren and made most of the journey by foot over steep mountains and dirt roads,” says Tarzikhan. “They had to cross the Turkish border at night with guards shooting at them.”

In another camp, set beside an abandoned toilet-paper factory in northern Greece, she met Samir, an old man whose bed was a thin blanket spread over a rock ledge inside a canvas tent.

“There was no shade, the food was rotten, medical care was minimal, and it was set in a polluted industrial wasteland,” she recalls. “When we met Samir, I thought he was in his 70s, and when he told me he was just 48, I had to ask again. The stress of the war and life in the camps has made him an old man.”

Samir was able to cross the border with two of his sons, but his wife and youngest son are still in Syria. Tarzikhan developed a deep relationship with Samir, and he refers to her as the daughter he never had.

It was often difficult to handle the inescapable comparisons between her life as a student researcher in America and the refugees’ lives in the camps.

“As a Syrian, I felt guilty for having this privilege, since I could just as easily have been one of them,” she continues. “As one refugee put it: ‘We’re both Syrian, but at the end of the day, you leave and I remain a refugee.’”

➔ **MAISAM ALAHMED WITH Mahmoud**, who was raised in a refugee camp and expects to die in a refugee camp.



THE BIGGEST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

5 million Syrian refugees

33% of the nation's housing destroyed

50% of the nation's medical and school facilities destroyed

78% unemployment

480,000 deaths

Tarzikhan continues her work with refugees. Last May, she returned to Greece to work with the Emergency Response Centre International, and she is now back on Lesbos on her second law school co-op with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. She has also started a social-media campaign on Facebook and Instagram called "Meet a Refugee."

She recently returned to the U.S. for one weekend to take part in the Clinton Global Initiative, which was held at Northeastern. Her project is a mental health intervention program for Syrian refugees on Lesbos.

"I feel a duty to do something," she says. "It's a very difficult adjustment to transition back to Northeastern after being in Greece. I talk to friends, and they tell me about their problems. It's hard to relate. I want to be in Greece. I need to find a way to tell their stories. Every time I go back, I find it harder to leave." ■

—From the *World Bank*, January 2017