

**Tineke Ceelen**

**Ter gelegenheid van de opening van het HRW-filmfestival**

**De Balie, Amsterdam, 2 februari 2018**

**FILM: 'Lost in Lebanon'**



## **TAHA**

In Lebanon I met Taha. Just a boy. Too long arms and too long legs. You recognise them, 15 year olds. Very shyly, Taha responded to all the attention we gave him. Taha fled Syria with his family.

He told us that his home was bombed; everything was destroyed, including this brand new white and shiny furniture for the bedroom. Heavily decorated with fake gold ornaments. Only the picture survived.

It is the picture Taha's father proudly presented to me, as proof of their wealthy and happy life in Syria.

Without the shiny furniture or any other belongings, but with some small savings, the family fled to Lebanon. They were still hopeful that they would be able to return to their hometown soon.

You all know how this story continues. The family was not able to go home.

Their savings, however, got depleted.

Eventually, It was inevitable, there was no money left to pay the rent for their single room apartment.

The landlord threatened to put the family with young children out on the streets.

Taha was the oldest son. He told us that he listened to the desperate conversations his parents had during the night, when they thought all children were asleep. It was impossible to keep a secret for their 15-year-old son, living with their whole family in one room.

Taha decided he needed to help his parents. He concluded that there was only one way: the streets of Beirut. 'I had no choice', Taha whispered to us, as if he felt ashamed. His mother was broken hearted, as you and I would be if our kid had to beg to survive.

'My mom cried very hard.', Taha told us.

Taha was one of the many thousands of Syrian children begging in the streets of Lebanon.

'Opvang in de regio', reception in the region, as we call it in the Netherlands. Refugees hosted by neighbouring countries. Taha and his family were Lost in Lebanon.

But Taha was lucky. I met him when he participated in our Street and Working Children-project. He was supported in finding a suitable internship and now has a small job and is able to raise some money for his family.

- This is only 1 story, of refuge, opportunities and survival: Taha. He represents millions.

- These are the consequences of 1 country in conflict: Syria. There are many more conflicts around the world.

- Tonight, we will discuss the situation in 1 neighbouring country, that is struggling with the boundaries of its hospitality towards refugees. Just like Turkey, Uganda and Bangladesh, Lebanon hosts over a million of refugees and cannot do this on its own.

We are approaching the 7th anniversary of the Syrian conflict.

And we are all aware of the horrifying facts and figures.

Over half of the Syrian population is displaced. About 5 million Syrian men, women and children are hosted by neighbouring countries.

These hosting populations had to deal with rapidly increasing prices of their houses, of their groceries, overcrowded classes in primary schools, long waiting lines at medical clinics, even decreased pressure from their water taps and lower wages, especially for low skilled labour.

In Lebanon, 1 out of 5 residents is a refugee. About half of the refugee children is able to go to a primary school, which means that the other half is unable to learn to read and write.

Many informal tented settlements in the north of the country, as well as in the Bekaa valley, bordering Syria, host Syrian refugees in improvised shelters. During the winter season the refugees have to deal with snow and temperatures below zero degrees; freezing cold. Their shelters are not suitable for these circumstances, they do not have sufficient winter clothes and shoes. To keep themselves warm, they use woodstoves inside their tents. Last December 7 children burned to death in such a shelter in the Bekaa Valley.

After 5 years of conflict and a so-called 'refugee crisis in Europe', the European Union decided to close its borders and agree on a 'migration deal' with Turkey. Newly displaced had no other choice but to stay in neighbouring countries.

Rapidly after, Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan also decided to close their borders. The Syrians were trapped in their country in conflict. Desperately displaced were no longer able to leave.

Turkey had even decided to shoot Syrians trying to cross their border.

In the no-man's-land between Syria and Jordan, called the Berm, thousands of refugees are barely surviving; they cannot get into Jordan, nor dare to return to Syria.

As the war in Syria drags on, we note the trend that always hits long-term conflicts: the international community loses focus and its attention shifts to other crises. This has direct consequences for the financial contributions to the humanitarian response in Syria and its neighbouring countries.

Recently, our partner the International Rescue Committee had to close down two of our mobile clinics that provide free of charge medical care to unregistered refugees in Jordan. We might also have to close our permanent medical clinics soon, due to a lack of financial resources. As a consequence, unregistered refugees, or those without valid documents, will have no access to a general practitioner or basic healthcare services.

Syrian refugees are cornered by the continued fighting, the closing of borders, and the underfunding of humanitarian organisations.

The consequences are enormous: many refugees are traumatised by the conflict as well as by the lack of hope for a better future in a third country; many stateless children are born without access to basic rights; parents decide to arrange marriages for their young daughters to protect them from sexual violence, which seems very cynical; radicalisation of marginalised and humiliated youth might be inevitable.

Europe appears satisfied, dik tevreden, with the way it dealt with the refugee crisis. The hosting of refugees in the Syrian region, in its neighbouring countries, seems to be the perfect solution.

Well, Europe is right; it did solve our problems.

Thankfully, we have Human Rights Watch to document the abuses and human rights violations.

We, at Stichting Vluchteling, have been closely cooperating with Human Rights Watch for many years already. We are proud of this partnership.

It is your and my duty to reveal human rights violations, to give voice to the voiceless, and to protect the dignity of the most vulnerable.

It is your and my duty to show what is happening, just a few hours travelling by plane from here.

It is your and my duty to remember the lessons we learned from other crises and respect the agreements we made to protect and defend life and human rights.

The impressive documentary, which you are about to watch, *Lost in Lebanon*, closely follows four Syrians, as they struggle to rebuild their lives in Lebanon. Lost, and mostly 'Trapped' in Lebanon. The consequences of new visa laws of the Lebanese government leaves the families at risk of arrest, detention, and deportation.

Nevertheless, the resilience of the Syrian communities is extremely powerful, as they work hard to build, share, and advocate for their lives in a new country.

Sophia and Georgia Scott, directors of this film, thank you for developing these strong portraits. Your film contributes to bringing the personal stories to the wider public, which makes the complex situation a bit easier to understand, and brings a human face to the discussion on displacement.

This is the first time this documentary is shown in the Netherlands. Thank you HRW, for providing this platform, to show the stories of the 'Tahas' living in Lebanon.

Taha and his family inspired me, as they endured really hard times and loss, and yet, continued. And Taha is now able to contribute to his family and bring some hope for the future.

Let the Syrians in the documentary also inspire you. As one community leader in *Lost in Lebanon* remarks: they did not stop laughing and dancing.

Thank you.