

UNHCR Refugee Camp in Jordan: Safe Haven for Jihadist Rebels and Arms Shipments into Syria

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Apart from the over 100,000 people estimated to have been killed in Syria, the most dramatic statistic illustrating the humanitarian crisis entailed by the ongoing war is surely the over two million Syrians estimated to be living as refugees in neighboring countries. Many are being housed in camps set up under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Details in a recent report in the French daily Le Figaro [1] reveal that one of the largest such camps, the Zaatari camp in Jordan, is, in effect, a safe haven for rebel forces fighting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Zaatari camp is located just over the Syrian border, about 50 kilometers from Daraa, one of the cradles of the anti-Assad uprising. According to the latest UNHCR statistics, it is currently home to nearly 123,000 people.



The details about the camp in the Le Figaro report are particularly significant in light of the presence in Zaatari of a French military hospital. The hospital opened in August 2012 to great fanfare in the French media as a humanitarian initiative aimed at alleviating the suffering of civilian victims of the war. The Le Figaro report makes it clear that at least some of the patients being treated there are not civilians, but rebel fighters.

The report highlights the activities of one Ghassem, a member of the so-called Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, who has accompanied a severely wounded comrade to Zaatari to receive medical attention. Ghassem's fellow fighter, Omran, has had his legs blown off by a landmine. The report notes that Ghassem "regularly comes to the aid of the revolution's wounded," i.e. presumably by bringing them to Zaatari for treatment. Per his own declarations, Ghassem will soon be slipping back across the border and on his return trip he will be carrying drugs to treat presumably less severely wounded comrades still in Syria.

That members of the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade would be receiving medical treatment on the

grounds of a UN-run refugee camp is at least ironic. The Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade is the same group that caused an international stir last March when it took 20 UN peacekeepers hostage near the Golan Heights. Shortly before that incident, videos were posted on pro-rebellion YouTube pages that documented the summary execution of captured Syrian soldiers by self-described members of the brigade. [2] The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, which serves as the basic statute of the UNHCR, specifically excludes people suspected of war crimes from enjoying protection as refugees under international law.

But the treatment of wounded fighters appears not to be the only benefit rebel forces derive from the Zaatari camp. According to Le Figaro, “mafias” have come to control a burgeoning black market in the camp. One such “mafia,” for instance, is reported to be pirating the camp’s UNHCR-funded electricity supply and selling electricity to private customers in the tents and prefabricated housing units that make up the camp. According to Le Figaro, these mafias are in turn “funneling money to the rebels.”

Perhaps most astonishing of all, however, are the observations of Kilian Tobias Kleinschmidt, the German UNHCR official who is in charge of the Zaatari camp. “Up until Ramadan in July, come evening young men would announce over megaphones that arms had arrived and that potential fighters had then to present themselves,” Kleinschmidt told Le Figaro. Kleinschmidt insisted that these calls-to-arms have now ceased. But the receipt of arms shipments at a UNHCR camp and the apparent organization of fighting units from within the camp calls into question the neutrality that is essential to the UNHCR’s humanitarian mission.

Returning to the matter of the French military hospital, according to Le Figaro, some 80 French military personnel are assigned to the facility. “But,” the paper notes somewhat enigmatically, “only a handful have medical functions.” [4] Le Figaro and other French media have reported that French Minister of Defense, Jean-Yves Le Drian, would like to close the Zaatari hospital as a money-saving measure. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, however, is reportedly committed to maintaining the facility.

John Rosenthal is a European-based journalist and political analyst who writes on transatlantic security issues. His new book is [The Jihadist Plot: The Untold Story of Al-Qaeda and the Libyan Rebellion](#). His articles have appeared in such publications as *World Affairs*, *Al-Monitor*, *Policy Review*, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, *Les Temps Modernes* and *Die Weltwoche*. You can follow his work at [Transatlantic Intelligence](#) or on [Facebook](#).

Notes

1. [Le camp de Zaatari entre mafias et detresse](#), Le Figaro, October 22, 2013.
2. For the videos and a discussion, see [Syria Exclusive: The Western-Armed Insurgents Who Executed POWs and Captured UN Peacekeepers](#), EAWorldview, March 11, 2013.
3. See [Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees](#), Article 1, paragraph f(a).
4. [L’hopital militaire francais, ouvert en 2012, pourrait fermer avant la fin de l’annee](#), Le Figaro, October 22, 2013.

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