



**ALJAZEERA  
MEDIA INSTITUTE**

**COVERING  
REFUGEE  
STORIES**



# TABLE OF CONTENT

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## INTRODUCTION 1

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## PREPARATION 3

Distinguishing  
Refugees from  
Other Categories 3

Language Matters 5

Planning Your Story 7

Pitching the Story 17

Tips on Pitching  
Stories to Editors 19

Al Jazeera  
Experience:  
Creativity  
with an Angle 23

# **BEST PRACTICE IN COVERING STORIES**

**25**

First Things First:  
Ethical Reporting **25**

Empathy as  
a Core Value **27**

Documenting  
Human Rights Abuses **29**

---

## **POST- COVERAGE**

**31**

Key Advice **31**

---

## **CONCLUSION**

**33**

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# INTRODUCTION

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The current global mass movement of people due to war and conflict, famine and economic challenges has dwarfed any such phenomenon since the Second World War. Half the population of Syria, around 11.4 million people, has been displaced, most inside the country but with millions of others seeking refuge in neighbouring countries in the Middle East and in Europe.

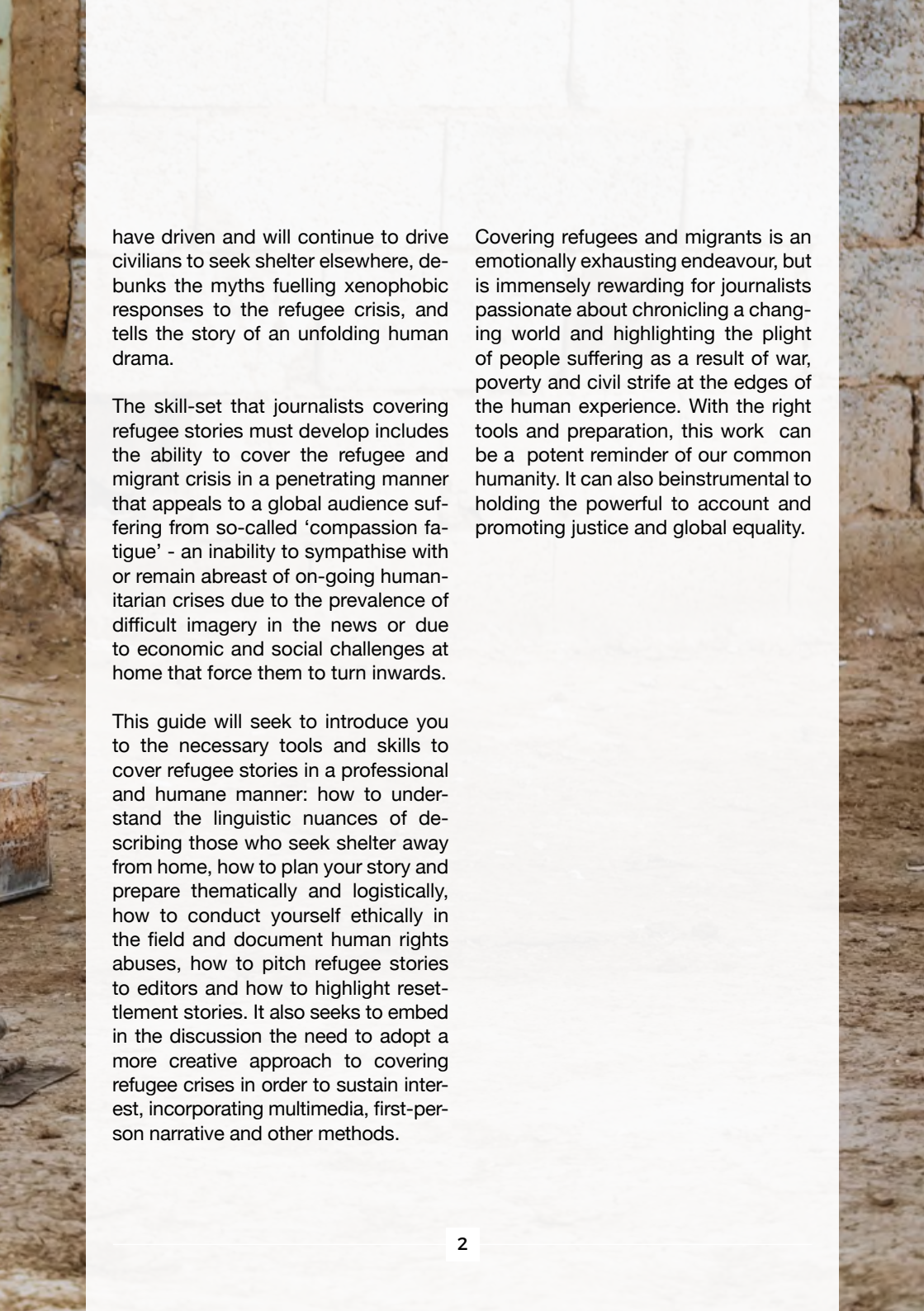
In North Africa and the islands of Southeast Asia, economic migrants who have fled their countries to build a new life for their families elsewhere face myriad human rights abuses in detention camps. Hundreds of thousands of people have resettled in Europe and the United States after surviving civil wars, foreign invasions and political persecution. Their arrival has brought new challenges, such as the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and right-wing political movements, cultural conflict and demographic change.

These difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by continuing instability and oppression in many regions of the world, growing global inequality and environmental calamities, which are set to increase, resulting in greater numbers of climate migrants.

All of these elements necessitate in-depth, nuanced, empathetic and creative coverage by journalists in the region and elsewhere, which highlights the economic and political trends that







have driven and will continue to drive civilians to seek shelter elsewhere, debunks the myths fuelling xenophobic responses to the refugee crisis, and tells the story of an unfolding human drama.

The skill-set that journalists covering refugee stories must develop includes the ability to cover the refugee and migrant crisis in a penetrating manner that appeals to a global audience suffering from so-called 'compassion fatigue' - an inability to sympathise with or remain abreast of on-going humanitarian crises due to the prevalence of difficult imagery in the news or due to economic and social challenges at home that force them to turn inwards.

This guide will seek to introduce you to the necessary tools and skills to cover refugee stories in a professional and humane manner: how to understand the linguistic nuances of describing those who seek shelter away from home, how to plan your story and prepare thematically and logistically, how to conduct yourself ethically in the field and document human rights abuses, how to pitch refugee stories to editors and how to highlight resettlement stories. It also seeks to embed in the discussion the need to adopt a more creative approach to covering refugee crises in order to sustain interest, incorporating multimedia, first-person narrative and other methods.

Covering refugees and migrants is an emotionally exhausting endeavour, but is immensely rewarding for journalists passionate about chronicling a changing world and highlighting the plight of people suffering as a result of war, poverty and civil strife at the edges of the human experience. With the right tools and preparation, this work can be a potent reminder of our common humanity. It can also be instrumental to holding the powerful to account and promoting justice and global equality.

# PREPARATION

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## Distinguishing Refugees from Other Categories

Prior to working on reporting the refugee crisis, you must be aware of the linguistic nuances that are crucial to the story – the distinction, according to the United Nations (UN), between a refugee, an internally displaced person (IDP), an asylum seeker, an economic migrant and a stateless person.



## Refugees

are people who fled their country due to war, conflict, feared persecution, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection.<sup>1</sup>



## IDPs

are persons or groups of persons who have been forced to leave their homes or communities, due to the effects of armed conflict, generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters. The main difference between an IDP and a refugee is that the former has not fled to another state, whereas the latter has. The rights and well-being of IDPs are still the responsibility of their national government, while refugees are protected by international law.<sup>2</sup>



## An asylum-seeker,

is someone who is seeking international protection and has requested asylum in a foreign country due to persecution or serious danger, but whose claim has not yet been assessed. In other words, an asylum seeker is someone who has formally requested to be granted status as a refugee in a foreign nation. All refugees are asylum seekers, but not all asylum seekers will end up being formally recognised as refugees and protected by international law.<sup>3</sup>



## An economic migrant

is someone who has chosen to leave their country of origin for reasons such as better economic opportunities or living standards. Hardships can force people to migrate for economic reasons. However, regardless of the reasons, it is important to distinguish economic migrants from refugees, as the former are not subject to international protection.<sup>4</sup>



## A stateless person

is 'a person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law.' In the context of Syria in particular, most stateless persons are children born to refugees who have fled the country and been unable to register their new-borns.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees' and 'Migrants' – Frequently Asked Questions." Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2tEULg4>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement." Accessed February 25, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/43ce1cff2.html>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Asylum-Seekers." Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2u4X6AM>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refugees' and 'Migrants' – Frequently Asked Questions."

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, "Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons." Accessed February 25, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2pXKFDh>

# PREPARATION

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## Language Matters

*Being familiar with these conceptual differences is key for at least two reasons:*

### 1. Identifying false narratives

These distinctions are important because of the rhetoric surrounding the refugee crisis in places that have received thousands of people over the last few years. Some of the arguments that call for limitations on the influx of refugees are based on the assumption that many of those seeking new homes abroad are not, in fact, refugees, but economic migrants, who are not fleeing persecution but possibly seeking to usurp the jobs of people in the countries that have welcomed them.

This is a problematic issue as it transforms the debate from one around shielding the vulnerable from death and destruction to one about economic opportunities. Xenophobia can be fuelled as people switch from sympathising with the plight of the oppressed to becoming hostile to others who are perceived to be ‘jumping the queue’ to gain the benefits of living in an affluent society. This is not meant as an argument against protecting economic migrants: they are also subject to a range of abuses, as evidenced by a recent CNN investigation that showed African migrants attempting to flee to Europe being held in horrific conditions in detention centres in Libya and even sold as slaves. Reporting on the abuses these people face and the conditions of economic inequality that spurred their flight are necessary. However an understand-

ing of the distinctions will help you to clarify when false narratives are being propagated and to grasp the nuances of local reactions to influxes of people fleeing their countries, as aside from the obligations of the states and the international community to those individuals. Always ask yourself who benefits from creating and propagating these false narratives.

### 2. Learning who is entitled to international protection

It is also important to understand the definitions because the status of an individual fleeing their country determines whether they have access to international protection. In the specific case of refugees, this includes a responsibility to admit them and ensure they are not forced to return to the place where they suffered persecution or violence, to ensure their safety and well-being, help them deal with trauma, help solve the crisis that led to their flight, help them return to their homes if that becomes feasible, and assist in their integration in their host country.

As a journalist covering these issues, you must understand these distinctions and report on trends in the movement of peoples around the world objectively, first by determining the kind of story you are reporting on.

### Quick Overview: Who is Protected by International Law?

While refugees and asylum seekers are protected by international law, IDPs and economic migrants are not.

Knowing this will help frame your understanding of how these individuals are being treated by the countries where they have sought refuge, to understand the abuse or violation of rights that they suffer in the context



of international laws and conventions, and to determine whether the host country is violating its international commitments.

A good starting point is an identification of whether the host country has signed the international treaties and covenants that protect refugees and asylum seekers.

### **International Refugee Protection Regime**

The legal regime protecting refugees is called international refugee protection, and is formed by:

- Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - the right of everyone to seek and enjoy asylum. The notion of asylum would be developed later, in the 1951 Convention.
- The bedrock of the legal framework of refugee protection, the 1951 Convention related to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, along with regional legal instruments, such as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the Cartagena Declaration.



## **Use of Terminology by Al Jazeera**

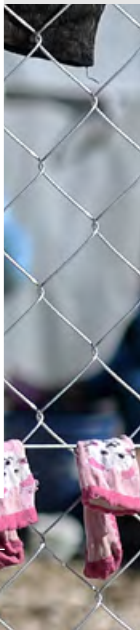
**By Montaser Marai,  
Manager of Media Development at  
the Al Jazeera Media Institute**

The English and Arabic Channels of Al Jazeera have debated thoroughly which words should be used to refer to people who have left their countries under a variety of circumstances. When large waves of asylum seekers first began to travel from Turkey to Europe, editors at our newsrooms used the term ‘migrant’. Editorial discussions later took place about the need to employ more precise terminology, taking into account the context in which people were leaving their countries of origin.

The first decision on terminology was in relation to Syrians forced to leave their homes because of war. Our newsrooms acknowledged that referring to them as ‘migrants’ did not accurately describe their situation, or the wider context of the humanitarian crisis they were experiencing, and, consequently, deprived them of the rights they were entitled to under international human rights and humanitarian law.

A second editorial decision was made to refrain from using the term ‘illegal immigrants’ and to replace it with ‘irregular immigrants’ to refer to people leaving their country of origin for economic reasons.

Al Jazeera has thus raised awareness within its newsrooms of the need to exercise caution not to fall into terminology traps that might seek to shape narratives, for example by depicting all people arriving in particular countries as illegal.



# PREPARATION

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## Planning Your Story

### 1. Determining the type of story you are covering

Before you go into the field, you must determine the type of story you will be reporting on. The following questions can be of help:

- Are you reporting on a news event that has led to a mass movement of people? An example might be a concerted assault by government forces on an area controlled by rebels that has led to thousands fleeing across the border to a neighbouring country.
- Are you covering a trend within the refugee community? An example might be refugee households increasingly sending children to work in factories or farms due to inadequate aid and poor living conditions.
- Are you investigating the consequences and effects that an influx of refugees has had on a host community? This could be residents in a European city voting in droves for far-right candidates who will stop migrants and refugees from settling in their country following an influx of such individuals.

### 2. Identifying salient themes and people of interest

**a. Salient themes:** This will be applicable primarily if you are covering the second or third type of story –stories focused on trends or consequences

and effects. Ask yourself: what are the issues you want to cover, beyond the breaking news that thousands of people are fleeing a war zone? Identify issues you care about that are typically related to refugees, and conduct research to see whether they afflict the communities you are writing about, for example, whether they feature high rates of single mothers leading households or whether conditions in refugee camps are being described as deplorable by human rights monitors. There are numerous of topics you might want to cover. Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Human trafficking of refugees, and its intersections with forced labour and the sex trade.**
  2. **Child labour.**
  3. **Schooling policies for refugee children in host countries.**
  4. **Conditions in refugee camps.**
  5. **Discrimination against refugees in host communities due to race, religion, gender etc..**
  6. **How resettled refugees are assimilating in their new homes.**
  7. **Mental health.**
- b. Persons of interest:** These are likely to be either prominent officials or members of host communities, law



enforcement officials, aid organisations working with refugees, and experts on the theme you are covering, such as mental health professionals or counsellors, labour specialists or human rights lawyers. Organisations that often work in the field, maintaining a presence even in war zones, include the UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

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## Al Jazeera Expertise: Language Barriers

**By Mohammed Jamjoon,  
Senior Correspondent at Al Jazeera  
English**

It is often apparent in the field that correspondents are struggling to communicate with refugees because they don't speak their language.

If the story you select entails interviewing or having conversations with refugees, make sure you have a good interpreter.

When covering stories that involve different groups of refugees fleeing across the border of a country, take into account that they may speak many different mother tongues. News crews don't necessarily have the language capacity. When selecting your story, always consider whether you are likely to encounter language barriers, and how are you going to communicate effectively.

”





## Pro Tip: Working with Aid Organisations

You must make your own decision about how closely to work with aid organisations. They can be crucial in terms of identifying relevant individuals to interview. If you are reporting on a trend of gender-based violence in refugee communities, for example, aid organisations working on the ground can often identify women they have assisted who have suffered from such abuse. We will discuss the ethical implications of this at a later stage, but keep in mind that aid organisations have their own agendas, such as fundraising for specific programmes, and may attempt to steer you in a direction that focuses on the work they are doing rather than on the challenges the refugees face on a daily basis. Your approach will need to be decided case by case.





### 3. Mapping your logistical needs

This is primarily about ensuring that all health and safety concerns relevant to you as a journalist are addressed in advance. These will depend on where your assignment is. Ask yourself the following questions, always erring on the side of safety.

- Do you have the relevant entry permits to the country you are visiting?
- Do you know in advance the route you will take to camps?
- Do you have a permit from the local authority to visit camps and interview residents? To visit the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, for example, you need an entry permit from the ministry of information.
- Are the routes there and back and the routes within camps safe?
- Are you likely to pass through check-points belonging to the government or local militias?
- Do you have the necessary protective gear and first aid kit should fighting occur while you are on the assignment?
- Is there a risk of being kidnapped?
- Are there vaccinations you need to get before visiting the area?
- Have you undergone recent training in operating in hostile environments?

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#### Al Jazeera Expertise: Additional Logistical Advice

By Mohammed El Bakkali,  
Correspondent at Al Jazeera

Consider also the following logistical advice to enhance your safety and health:

- Research the religious and cultural characteristics of the refugees you are covering. This will help to minimise miscommunication and encourage a good rapport with refugees.
- When covering a story inside a refugee camp, analyse carefully where you are going to spend your nights, as hotels are typically far away or, if nearby, usually fully booked.
- Always carry always medical treatments for common illness, such as diarrhoea, allergic reactions and headaches.
- Take suitable clothes for the weather, keeping in mind that you will typically not be working in easy terrain.

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There are no hard and fast rules on gathering this information. Your primary resources might be:

- ▶ Fellow journalists who operate in the area where you plan to report. Experienced journalists will be able to advise you on whether the journey is safe enough to make, and can recommend trustworthy local drivers and fixers they have worked with before..
- ▶ Aid organisations that provide assistance to refugees and other individuals in the same location. Sometimes, you can arrange with those organisations to visit the locations with them.

“

### **AI Jazeera Expertise: Little Things are Crucial to Your Safety**

**by Shadi Rahimi,  
Senior Producer at AJ+**

When you arrive in the field to cover refugee stories, it's the little things that matter: where do you get a SIM card? Have fellow journalists or activists been robbed? Should you bring locks for suitcases?

There are no stupid questions. Do as many pre-interviews as you can, particularly with NGOs and journalist friends who know the terrain.

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# Checklist:

## Additional Advice for Your Safety

- 1 Make sure you are fully apprised of the risks and operational plan before you enter a dangerous zone, and always err on the side of safety.  
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- 2 A dead or kidnapped journalist cannot report.  
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- 3 Ensure that the organisation you are working with has a full itinerary of your plan of action and can step in if necessary.  
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- 4 Establish a plan of regular contact so they are always aware of your whereabouts.  
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- 5 Make sure you have attended a recent hostile environment training programme. Many organisations that provide support for freelancers, such as the [Rory Peck Trust](#), offer such opportunities for freelance journalists who do not work permanently with a specific news organisation.  
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- 6 Invest in a first aid kit. The combination of hostile environment training and first aid skills will help you know how to conduct yourself even if things go wrong.  
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- 7 Finally, and this can't be stressed enough, if you have the slightest doubt about your safety, DO NOT DO IT. Nobody will benefit from the insights of a reporter who was not alive to tell the story he/she sought to witness.  
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## 4. Emotional and mental preparation

Many of the people you interview, particularly in breaking news situations such as the recent flight of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, will have escaped emotionally traumatic circumstances such as the destruction of their homes, physical or sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, and other abuses or atrocities. Take care of yourself in the lead-up to your reporting trip, and in its aftermath. Try to disconnect from your work whenever possible and to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Pursue hobbies unrelated to work in your downtime, and pursue whatever spiritual, mental or physical discipline helps you to de-stress. If you are on the permanent staff of a media organisation, talk to your management to get support.

The account by the New York Times' correspondent Jeffrey Gettleman on [interviewing a Rohingya refugee](#) whose child was thrown into a fire is powerful and instructive.







## Pro Tip: What to Expect

Throw your expectations out of the window. Refugees, like other groups, cannot be pigeonholed. You will find doctors and highly trained professionals as well as the destitute and illiterate. You will meet people who witnessed violence that broke them emotionally, and children who are resilient even in the face of war. Some will want to talk to you, others will despise the media. Beware of trying to fit the people you meet into prescribed narratives such as that of the down-trodden refugee without agency. Let them speak for themselves.

# PREPARATION

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## Pitching the Story

Contrary to the popular assertion that stories of refugee suffering are falling out of favour with editors, mainstream media outlets routinely cover refugee stories. These range from incremental developments in the movement of peoples during escalations in conflicts around the world, to trend and feature stories that mesh well with periodic updates by the UN or humanitarian organisations. There is also the occasional viral news story such as the tragedy of the child [Aylan Kurdi](#), as well as frequent alarmist coverage in tabloids that cater to anti-immigrant sentiment.

Both reporters and humanitarian organisations complain that there is so-called 'compassion fatigue' amongst readers, that they are tired of reading depressing news. This might be true to a certain extent, but it is not the reason media outlets reject refugee stories. Most mainstream media outlets see a public service responsibility in continuing to cover the refugee story.







So why are some refugee stories rejected, then?

Too often, refugee stories are rejected because they are poorly pitched. This might not necessarily be the journalist's fault. Usually, refugee stories get rejected for at least one of the following reasons:



Poor timing.



Insufficient creativity or uniqueness to the material.



The story is too incremental and does not further the discussion around the crisis in a substantial way.

# PREPARATION

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## Tips on Pitching Stories to Editors

An exclusive, well-documented investigation into an under-reported trend or uncovered atrocity will never be rejected by a professional editor. The following advice will help you increase the chances of your story being picked. Some of these, such as selecting the right publication, apply to freelancers rather than staff reporters.

### 1. Do your research

This is as much about the story as about the publication. Ensure you have done enough research and work on the ground to know there is a story to be reported. Editors are much more likely to greenlight a project and spend resources on it if it has a high likelihood of panning out, rather than being based on the hunch of a reporter. Make sure you're pitching to the right publication – a report on discrimination against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is likely to garner more interest in a publication focused on Middle Eastern affairs than a business news outlet.

### 2. Choose your timing

Editors prefer to publish features and analysis with a news peg, meaning they are related to a significant news development, or perhaps an up-coming anniversary or special occasion. Try to time your pitch for when your editors will be most likely to accept it. Otherwise you will be competing for attention in the midst of major news developments from around the world

and your story might get rejected, receive less play on the website or the print copy of the newspaper, or languish in the story queue until the next major development.

### 3. Be concise and clear

Editors are busy people, so you need to perfect your speedy pitch. Explain your idea in a short email or telephone call. Be sure to include answers to the following questions:


- *What is your story about?*
- *How it will move coverage of the refugee crisis forward?*
- *How you will report the story?*

If you hear nothing back, follow up. If you get rejected, take the story somewhere else and don't take it personally.

### 4. Be creative with format

In an online world in which you are competing for clicks, you need to diversify your stories. In-depth investigations are not the only way to report on the refugee crisis and the ensuing human rights abuses. Multimedia explainers are a popular form of condensing complex stories for readers, and virtual reality can provide a particularly immersive experience.





## 5. Look for new angles and diversify your themes

Certain themes in the refugee crisis have been covered ably and often. Most likely, editors won't approve such stories unless they are covered from a unique angle or if they significantly advance the conversation.

As a reporter for Lebanon's *The Daily Star*, for example, I spent the night with a family of refugees in their tent on the eve of a winter storm, to give a sense of how they endured life in the Bekaa Valley winter. Most other journalists wrote brief pieces about the gathering storm and the absence of sufficient shelter and clothing, which often fail to portray the real challenges facing such families, particularly those with small children.

Another emotive and compelling angle can be found through first-person narratives that offer readers unique and unfiltered perspectives from the field. An alternative to finding new angles to well-known themes is finding new or under-investigated topics. Some of these are listed in the section on *Planning Your Story*. Explore reporting on mental health issues, or the challenges facing the families of children born to refugee parents, who are often stateless and without valid papers to guarantee their rights. Another option is following the journey itself, with all of its harrowing risks. This can often serve to highlight the severity of the conditions where the refugees come from.



## 6. Tell the human story, but avoid clichés

As discussed below, numbers are important in order to put tragedies occurring on a massive scale into perspective for readers, but focusing on them is an easy way to ensure readers do not remember your story. People identify with other human beings, not with abstract figures. Try to avoid the clichés that pervade coverage of the refugee crisis. Too often, coverage of refugees fleeing to the west emphasises their victimhood as a way of garnering sympathy. People fleeing persecution are victims, but they also have agency. Your role is to bear witness to their struggle, not to pigeon-hole them or superimpose your own perspective of their plight.

Remember that none of these rules is going to replace dogged pursuit of the truth and the skilful and empathetic weaving of a human story that readers can identify with, understand, and share with their communities, online and offline.

“

### Al Jazeera Expertise: Context Can Give You New Angles

by Shadi Rahimi,  
Senior Producer at AJ+

You can find new angles by not just reporting on the crisis itself but on its root causes. Context is key.

Consider how people are impacted by policies. Follow up on how global and national decisions play out on a small scale, how one person's life is impacted by the larger policy. Dispel stereotypes with facts.

One of the biggest misperceptions, for example, is that refugees are by definition poverty-stricken. We know this to be far from the truth when speaking of Syrian refugees. Debunk myths. Many refugees are just latest waves of people that have been in the countries they are migrating to for decades. Give historical context.

”



### **Pro Tip: A Key Rule to Avoid Clichés**

The best way to avoid clichés when telling a human story is to let the humans tell their own story. One instructive example of how powerful such reporting can be is Wendy Pearlman's book 'We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled,' which consists entirely of the stories of Syrian refugees at various critical stages of the uprising in their country. Another powerful example is the [Al Jazeera project chronicling the refugee crisis through the eyes of the refugees themselves.](#)

# PREPARATION

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## Al Jazeera Experience: Creativity with an Angle

Al Jazeera English has produced multiple projects that highlight how combining different formats with novel angles can result in fresh takes on an issue that has already been widely covered. Check out these examples to get a sense of the elements that make a refugee story human-centred, meaningful and appealing. Try to identify the advice discussed in the section on [Tips on Pitching Stories to Editors](#).

### [- Interactive: The refugee crisis beyond Europe](#)

A guide to the refugee crisis which uses infographics and an interactive quiz to engage audiences materially with the news, along with a Q&A that lays out the issues in a simple way, understandable to readers who have not been following the myriad conflicts up close.

### [- Refugee crisis 2016: 12 countries, 12 months](#)

This piece looks at how the global refugee crisis affected 12 different countries in the year 2016 using vivid images and captions that bring home the scale of the unfolding drama. A creative slant is added through interviews with a woman who is the first person







refugees meet when they arrive in Macedonia, a human story that allows an initial glimpse into the challenges of integration faced by those fleeing war.

### **- In the footsteps of a Rohingya refugee**

Perhaps the best example of how multimedia and new ways of telling stories can engage readers is this powerful virtual reality project by Al Jazeera showing the journey of a Rohingya refugee.

### **- AJ+'s coverage of the refugee crisis**

AJ+ covered refugees fleeing from the Middle East and trying to cross the borders of European countries. Their coverage is a good example of how new formats combined with effective storytelling can result in great journalistic pieces. They used a multi-platform approach and used the then new live-streaming features on Facebook and Periscope in an unprecedented way. Viewers of AJ+'s live coverage were able to interact with refugees by asking questions and starting conversations.

# BEST PRACTICE IN COVERING STORIES

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## First Things First: Ethical Reporting

Contrary to the popular assertion that stories of refugee suffering are falling out of favour with editors, mainstream media outlets routinely cover refugee stories. These range from incremental developments in the movement of peoples during escalations in conflicts around the world, to trend and feature stories that mesh well with periodic updates by the UN or humanitarian organisations. There is also the occasional viral news story such as the coverage surrounding the tragedy of the child Aylan Kurdi, as well as frequent alarmist coverage in tabloids that cater to anti-immigrant sentiment.

Both reporters and humanitarian organisations complain that there is so-called 'compassion fatigue' amongst readers, that they are tired of reading depressing news. This might be true to a certain extent, but it is not the reason media outlets reject refugee stories. Most mainstream media outlets see a public service responsibility in continuing to cover the refugee story.

### • **Refugees do not have to speak to you.**

In fact, many do not want to speak to the media, either to avoid recriminations affecting themselves or their families by local authorities back home, because they have suffered trauma such as sexual violence that carries with it a societal stigma, or

simply because they feel that cooperation with media outlets has not led to an improvement in their lives. Be clear that you cannot control the reactions to your reporting, respect the desire for privacy when it is expressed, and evaluate whether you can grant anonymity if this is requested out of legitimate fear. If they say no, respect that.

### • **Be sensitive to the on-going plight of refugees.**

Most refugees are living in a state of persistent trauma. They had to flee their homes, and have gone overnight from the safety of their communities to refugee camps, where the future is uncertain and peril is still very real. Be aware of those stress factors and always treat people with dignity.

### • **Avoid re-traumatising victims**

Refugees who have been victims of torture, sexual abuse and major trauma may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Special care needs to be taken during questioning. Some might be eager to share what they endured in detail so it can be documented. Others might be reluctant, and could experience relapses as a result of direct questioning. For journalists without significant experience in interviewing such individuals, it might be helpful to have a case officer from an aid organisation present during the interview, to help build trust and to carefully steer the conversation to best approach the trauma.

## Two Musts When Interviewing Children

Media outlets usually frown on the interviewing of children. However it can be difficult to avoid if you are doing a story on child labour, for example. If you are interviewing children:

- If possible, ensure you have permission from parents or guardians beforehand.
- Protect their identities at all times by using a pseudonym, blurring their images and using a voiceover.

“

### Al Jazeera Expertise: Anonymity in Crowds

by Shadi Rahimi,  
Senior Producer at AJ+

Respect anonymity. Be mindful of people who need to keep their identities private. Point the phone/camera away from mass crowd shots and keep the focus on people who have agreed to be filmed.

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# Empathy as a Core Value

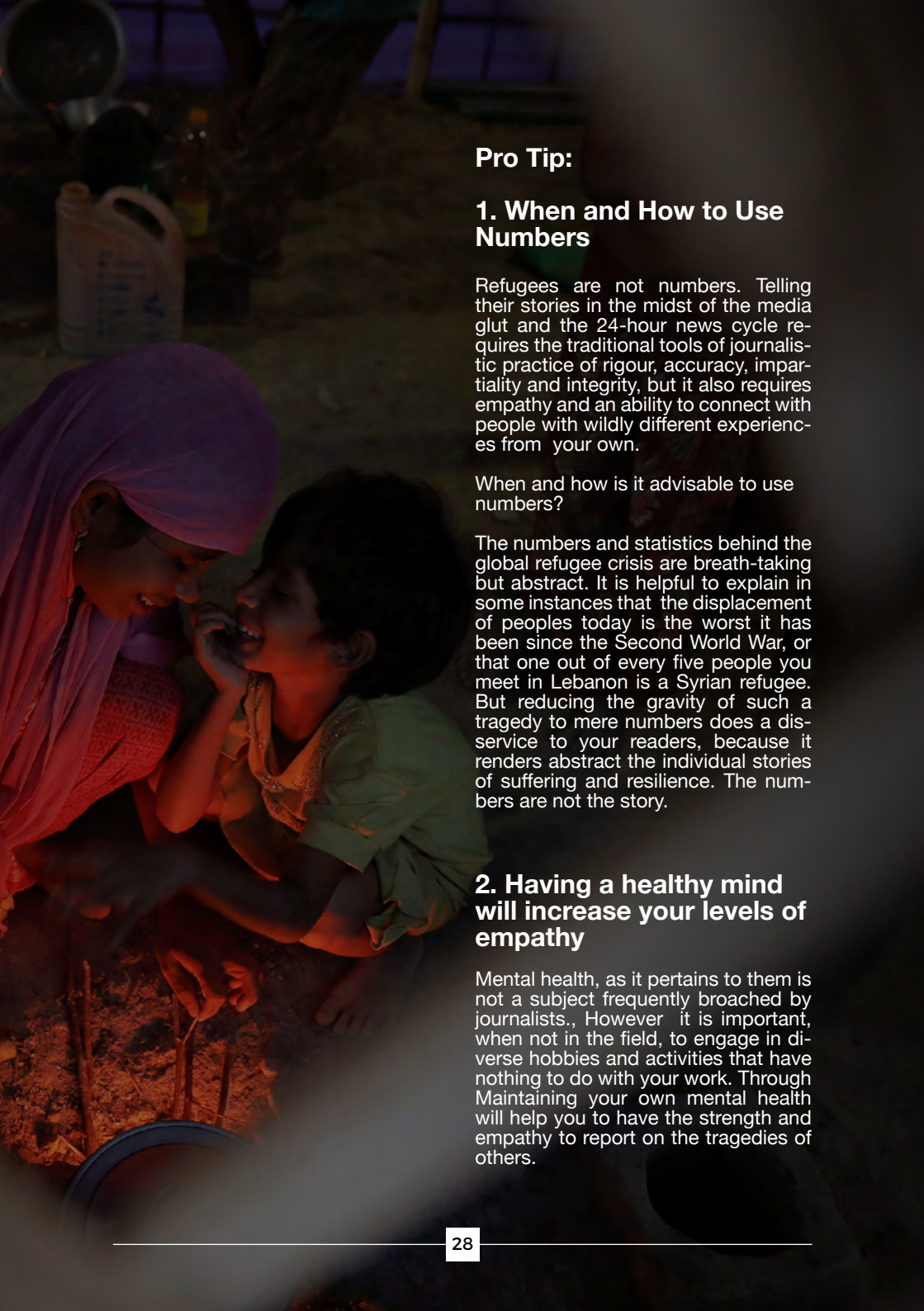
*A crucial part of ethical reporting while covering refugee stories is being empathetic.*

## What does empathy mean?

- ✔ Bearing witness and amplifying the voices of the dispossessed, while appreciating the suffering they have endured.
- ✔ Understanding that refugees are not numbers or simply a story that you will move on from once the assignment is over. Caring about the fate of other human beings.
- ✔ Acknowledging and appreciating the good fortune that put you in the privileged position of being the interviewer rather than the interviewee in this context, and of being someone who reports on abuses perpetrated against the weak and holds the strong to account.

## Empathy does not mean:

- ✘ Reporting the stories you are told in the field uncritically.
- ✘ Foregoing the rigours of reporting in the interests of promoting a dramatic narrative that will sell a story, or acting as a campaigner or activist on behalf of the downtrodden.
- ✘ Giving false hope to people who might implore you to tell their story in the hope that they will receive more food baskets or win an offer of resettlement (both of which are reasons refugees sometimes speak to reporters).



## Pro Tip:

### 1. When and How to Use Numbers

Refugees are not numbers. Telling their stories in the midst of the media glut and the 24-hour news cycle requires the traditional tools of journalistic practice of rigour, accuracy, impartiality and integrity, but it also requires empathy and an ability to connect with people with wildly different experiences from your own.

When and how is it advisable to use numbers?

The numbers and statistics behind the global refugee crisis are breath-taking but abstract. It is helpful to explain in some instances that the displacement of peoples today is the worst it has been since the Second World War, or that one out of every five people you meet in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee. But reducing the gravity of such a tragedy to mere numbers does a disservice to your readers, because it renders abstract the individual stories of suffering and resilience. The numbers are not the story.

### 2. Having a healthy mind will increase your levels of empathy

Mental health, as it pertains to them is not a subject frequently broached by journalists. However it is important, when not in the field, to engage in diverse hobbies and activities that have nothing to do with your work. Through Maintaining your own mental health will help you to have the strength and empathy to report on the tragedies of others.

# BEST PRACTICE IN COVERING STORIES

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## Documenting Human Rights Abuses

Covering refugee stories is unlike reporting on other issues. The levels of trauma and suffering involved complicate reporting on refugees as compared to covering daily breaking news stories or traditional beats (although many of the same ethical reporting issues apply there as well). However it also makes it more rewarding on a visceral level.

At the most basic level, telling stories about refugees is telling how other human beings, in the midst of trauma and suffering, lead their daily lives. It involves bearing witness to the plight of individuals who have often survived incidents that brought them to the very edge of human endurance and experience. The stories you will hear as a reporter covering refugees may be deeply moving experiences that offer powerful lessons on the human experience. Absorb them and learn from them, and know that you are privileged to be offered such intimate confidences.

Their vulnerable status means that refugees are often victims of human rights abuses. Regardless of the type of story you choose, asking yourself about these abuses and documenting them if you find them will build a narrative that allows for accountability. You must observe the traditional rules of reporting on human rights abuses.







These include, but are not limited to:

- a) Detailing with as much specificity as possible the alleged human rights violations.
- b) Understanding why such practices violate international law.
- c) Corroboration of the narratives through interviews with as large a sample as possible.
- d) Asking probing questions and fact-checking claims with other sources of information.
- e) Investing time and energy to cultivate sources with knowledge of on the ground activities in inaccessible areas where human rights violations are taking place.

### **Pro Tip: Your Role as a Journalist is not Activism**

You might find yourself in the odd situation of being asked to intervene in a matter with aid officials or being implored by a refugee to highlight his or her case. Sometimes they will ask you whether speaking to you will help them secure additional assistance or perhaps be recommended for resettlement.

You must be absolutely clear about the limits of your role. You are there to listen to whoever will talk to you, to bear witness, and to portray an accurate and truthful image to your readers. Explain that you are only doing your job and that you cannot guarantee that their situation will change because of your reporting. Of course, if you encounter someone facing a life-threatening situation, you should fulfil your duty as a human by trying to help.

# POST- COVERAGE

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## KEY ADVICE

As a journalist, your relationship with a story rarely ends with its publication. This is especially true of stories about refugees and migrants. The people you interview, whether they have just escaped a war zone, have just landed on safe shores where they will claim asylum, or are trying to integrate in a foreign and unfamiliar society, will be at various points on a continuing odyssey. What you chronicle will be merely a fraction of that struggle. You may want to pursue new projects, continuing to hold governments to account for their failures to protect or provide for their asylum seekers, for example. In this case, the contacts you have built in the field might prove useful.

### 1. Always consider following up on the story.

Your editors might expect you to revisit stories later down the line. After time, the story might have morphed from one of the mass struggle of tens of thousands of people fleeing a conflict or poverty into one about how those people are coping with their newfound freedom.

However there is a more important reason why you should stay in touch with the people whose lives and struggles you have chronicled as part of your work. Those people opened up to you at a vulnerable moment in their lives, when they were fleeing to preserve themselves and their children. If we are to chronicle their stories as human beings, not as numbers, then

we should not treat them as business prospects to be tapped when you have a freelance assignment, but rather as we ourselves would like to be treated – as a human being with worldly cares and problems. Inquire about their health, their families, their well-being. Who knows, you might also stumble on new story ideas from your interactions.

### 2. Make sure you promote your story.

This does not have to be an exercise in naked self-promotion. If you are covering a topic that you care deeply about, you will want more people to read it and be engaged with the crisis you explore. Share it on social media and urge your friends to do so too. If it is ground-breaking work, you will be asked to appear on radio or TV programmes to talk about the project. Do it.

### 3. Make sure you take some time out to care for yourself.

Covering conflict, or people fleeing conflict who are traumatised as a result is tough work both physically and mentally, even if it doesn't compare with the trauma your subject may have endured. Make sure you do whatever works for you to relax, whether it is physical exercise, spiritual practice, travelling, or long walks. This is not a selfish exercise. A small minority of journalists thrive on the anger and depression that witnessing injustices on a regular basis evokes in normal human beings. For the rest of us, it's important to take time out so we can return energised to the task at hand.







## CONCLUSION

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I hope that after reading this you will feel equipped with the mental and logistical tools to cover the refugee crisis well. Your success will depend on the attitude you bring to your story. If you feel inspired by the struggle you witness, and grasp the significance of the odysseys people share with you as they fight to rebuild their lives, if you empathise with them and treat them with humanity and dignity, you will probably succeed. If you approach the work as another boring assignment by your editors on a theme that has been rehashed over and over, you will likely fail.

Covering refugee issues is an emotionally and physically demanding endeavour. It is also immensely rewarding, particularly if you became a journalist in order to highlight injustice and the different facets of the human experience. There will be moments when you lose faith in humanity, and other moments when you will be inspired and elated by people's generosity. If you plan well, make human connections, work hard and care, yours will be a critical voice in the conversation around one of the most difficult challenges of our time.





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