

//Dilara Akarçesme //Ayad Salim

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## Changing perspectives through media representation: refugee.tv

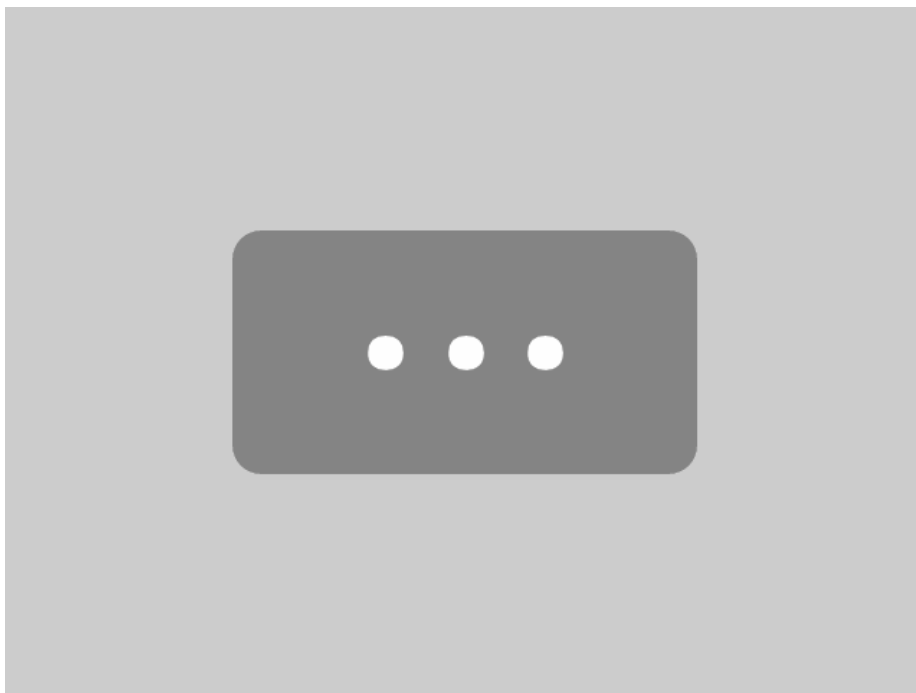
Ayad Salim, interviewed by Dilara Akarçesme

In the late summer of 2015, a comparatively large number of Syrian refugees arrived in central Europe in an attempt to escape the conditions of war. Within global media and academia, this phenomenon was often referred to as the European refugee “crisis”; by those critical voices who wanted to counter the narrative of refugees being the problem, it was called “the long summer of migration”. In the face of the contradictory responses of European border securitization as well as the highly divisive rhetoric and discourses surrounding this phenomenon, media coverage on forced migration and the representation of the newly arrived individuals has gained increasing attention. In an effort to promote content created by refugees themselves, a group of German and Austrian filmmakers in Salzburg joined forces with newly arrived refugees, including some who were professional journalists and filmmakers, to co-found the project “refugee.tv”.

In this interview, Ayad Salim, one of the founding members of refugee.tv, talks about the origins, development and purpose of the project.

*Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how refugee.tv emerged?*

Before I came to Europe, I was a journalist in Iraq for 19 years. I worked for international media associations from Europe and the United States. The initial spark for *refugee.tv* started when Johannes came to the camp, interested in making a video for a competition he wanted to participate in. He was a media artist, involved with wastecooking at that time. My acquaintances at the camp told him about me and that I am a journalist and a director. When we met, the first groundwork for *refugee.tv* was laid. We talked and exchanged some ideas and made a video about the daily life at the refugee camp at Moosstraße in Salzburg. After that, we created some ideas to further work together. Then, I met David Gross, who was excited about my experience. We decided to start a project called *refugee.tv*. The subtitle was “the other perspective”: we wanted this project to be a bridge between the refugees and the society in Salzburg. We wanted to show people the truth about refugees, since they had many misconceptions rooted in the mainstream media coverage about us. We wanted to let people know about the facts and reasons for the flight of refugees.



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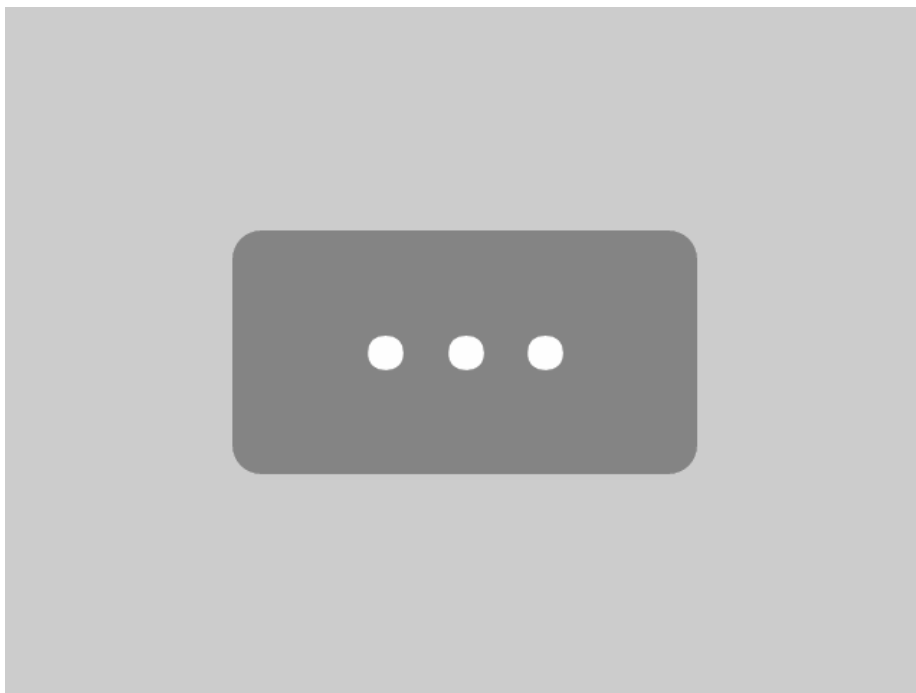
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The first challenge was the very term *refugee*. It comprises individuals from a vast number of countries. I, personally, was covering Arabic refugees. We share a lot concerning terrorism, war and instability. For instance, for me, the biggest reason to leave Iraq in spite of my good life there was being a journalist and my religion. I was the chief of the Saudi Arabian channel in Bagdad as well as a political analyst for some channels like Russia Today or France24. I really had a good life and it was not easy to leave it all and flee. However, I had to because militias tried to kill me twice. It was very hard to start from minus - not even from zero. Therefore, my big aim was to provide people with information about the reasons for our presence here. Questions I wanted to elaborate were: 'What are the features of our culture?', or 'What are mutual things between Arabic and European or Austrian culture?'. We found many interesting common features there. Our first report was in October 2015 on borders when in September 2015 many refugees arrived in Salzburg. I had arrived earlier in January in the same year. The first report got a lot of attention.



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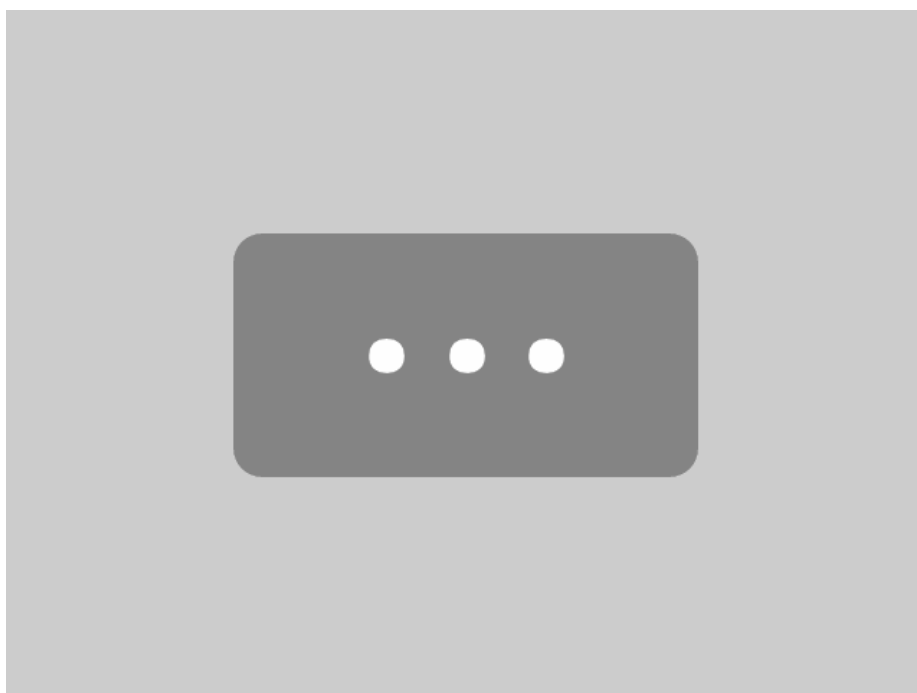
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Then we grew larger in numbers. More people came to us and more people believed in our project. They loved it. We did many interviews with different organizations and explained who we are, what we are doing and what we are planning to do. It grew so fast until we had an interview in Vienna with ORF. That was our first interview. Then *refugee.tv* expanded to four cities: Salzburg, Linz, Vienna and Munich. In Salzburg, we established *refugee.tv media school*, which was a workshop to teach how to work with media, how to use the equipment and how to do reports. We covered many local events, like *One Billion Rising* or other cultural events. We even formed a music band.

At the first anniversary of *refugee.tv*, we had an event at ARGEkultur which many people attended. There were even more Austrians than refugees. We got funded by the government and got donations. All in all, the project lasted around two and a half years and it was very successful. We wanted to get bigger and maybe become a channel, but it did not work out. Also, David Gross went to Japan. At that time, it was a good project and it had a very good reputation.

*How did you select the topics to cover in your reports?*

At the beginning, David Gross gave us ideas because we did not have much experience with how Austrian people think. I had some experience with Europeans in general because at the beginning of my media life, I worked as a translator for Europeans who came to Iraq and wanted to make some reports, stories, articles etc. They needed a translator. But with Austrian society, we did not have much experience. Later, we developed ideas and David gave us advice about what would work. And it really did work. I have to say that he was a good manager. We discussed things openly. Sometimes we would get a bit upset, but that was just for the work. Then, we got together and had a drink and it was ok again. The work was very important for us, and it was very good.



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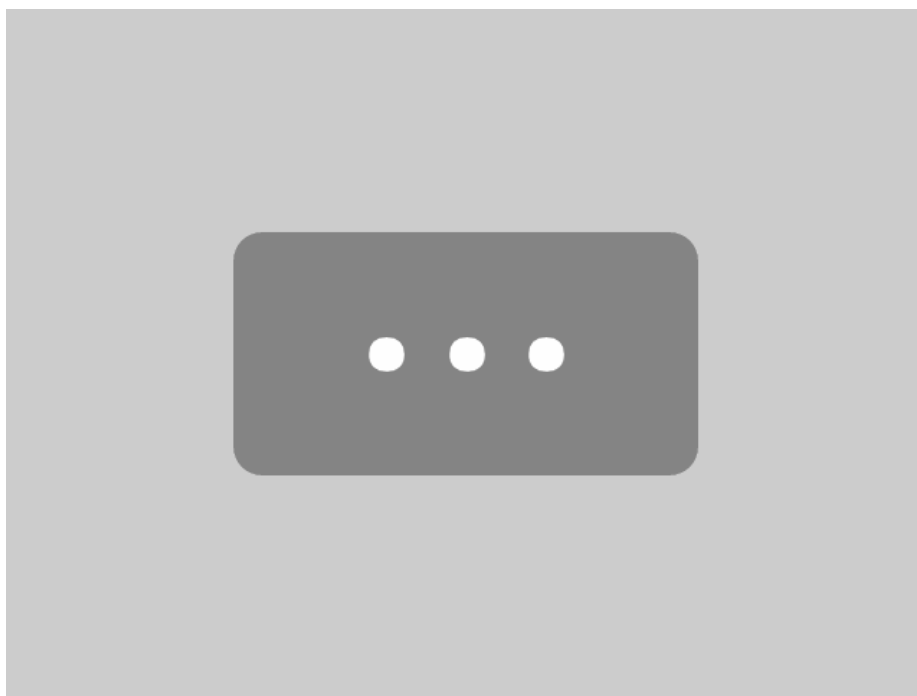
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*Who was your target audience?*

We aimed for Austrian society. Also, our language in the reports should be comprehensible for everybody. We did not aim for politicians, but for the people. We changed many wrong ideas about refugees.

### What kind of reactions did you get?

We got a lot of positive reactions. I think the evidence for that were the donations. Many people supported us. They told us that they had many misconceptions about us and that they now understand why we left our countries. We changed a lot of ideas about Arabic culture and about refugees here. Let me give an example about Arabic refugees: When we came from Iraq and Syria and they saw that we had smartphones, it was a big problem at that time. "Refugee with a smartphone!", they said. Then we explained to them that we are not necessarily poor people. I am just one example of many, but from 2007 until I came here, my salary was between \$ 4,500 and \$ 5,000 a month. There are also many people who come here to work because they lack prospects in their home countries, but Iraq is really a rich country. We wanted people to differentiate. We had many discussions after events, at parties, at presentations etc. We made clear that we are here because our lives and families are threatened with death. That's why we are coming here, and we come with our smartphones. This is an example of how we succeeded in changing ideas. We are all refugees, but we have different reasons to be refugees.



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*Did you also work with migrants who have been living in Salzburg for a longer period of time? Where they also a target audience?*

Yes, they were a target group, but less so than the local Austrian society whom we really aimed for. Many immigrants were active, and they participated in our project because they believed in our cause. They also wanted this project to be successful. We exchanged many ideas. The reason for our cooperation was that our work was going to affect the immigrants here as well: society would also change in how they deal with them, too. That's why they also felt the importance of this project and why they were active.

For example, when we wanted some ideas and we needed some families to shoot with, they were active and gave us all the tools. They gave us access to many things in their lives and stories of their families and the possibility to shoot with them. But our first aim was Austrian society. Then came the immigrants. They were also somehow hidden crew members of *refugee.tv* as supporters. That was really nice.

*The project was successful, you grew and had four offices. You mentioned, though, that you also wanted to become a channel and it did not work out. What were the reasons for this?*

We do not know either. Maybe the head crew was separated. Maybe everyone had other things to do. A project like this needs a budget. At first, we got our budget from the government and some other sources, but we needed more. We were also looking for jobs at the same time, since *refugee.tv* was not our job – it was voluntary. We just occasionally got some money to cover our basic needs to do reports. My aim at that time was just to tell people our stories. I also published my story from Turkey to here on a blog called *fish+fleisch*. It was really very dangerous and eventful – it took 45 days in the middle of winter, from December 1st in 2014 until the 15th of January 2015, walking from Turkey to here. We were lost in the woods for three months with all the snow. It was really horrible.

But we did not have much contact with the other offices. David and Johannes were the coordinators. We had one common event in Salzburg with the office in Linz and Vienna. We had a workshop at *refugee.tv media school* and an event with the *refugee.tv support band*. In the second year, we did some magazines and reports but then it stopped. Also, everybody was busy with their own lives and work. One person from the crew left Austria and went to Turkey. Now, I am working on something else. Recently, I established an Arabic cultural Verein <sup>\*(1)</sup> in Salzburg. I have been working on it since 2018. Now it is official. We did the official opening on the 16th of November in 2019.

*What kind of Verein is it? Are you planning on being involved with media as well?*

The official name is *Arabischer Kulturverein in Salzburg*. Our logo says *marhaba*. It means *servus*. <sup>\*(2)</sup> It is open, and not only for one nationality. My idea is to make a project similar to *refugee.tv*, but not just with media. I want to create one united Arabic voice to explain the different Arab

nationalities, ideas and personalities, and also to show the culture. This is about culture, not religion or anything political. We want to have events like music events and also events for children. We want to offer some consulting to Arabic families, to help them with applications and translations, help them in the process of finding flats, here and there. Within the foundation, I used minor connections to the city and state of Salzburg. They know us from *refugee.tv*, since I was a bit active in interviewing organizations. So I met people and they supported us. The state gave us a budget and the city also participated with some amount. Now the initial stage is finished and we are preparing the budget for the next year. Then we will see how it goes. We have big ideas: we want to make some events with Austrian and Arabic people together. Many Austrians are very motivated, and we also have some Austrian members now – not just Arabic members. It is all open. Also, the *Verein* is not only for the city of Salzburg, but for entire state of Salzburg. Now, we are at the beginning and are establishing our basis. We try to be more public. We plan many actions and activities. Also, we are thinking of having special offers for women. The vice deputy is a woman and she does several things for women when it comes to learning the language, finding a job or concerning health issues.

Anyone who has an idea about a project or an activity can come to us. We will discuss it and find ways to do it. For now, we don't have a stable or permanent place. Each Friday, we can use the space at *Hilfswerk* and each Wednesday we have a *Fahrradreparatur*. \*(3) I hope when we do the budget for next year and we get a better amount, we can rent a place and make it like an Arabic café for meetings, which is open for everybody. This is the big aim. If we had such a place, we could do many things.

We focus on culture because culture is like a museum. People can go to this museum and see things they like and do not like. Often, things they don't like are just unfamiliar things to them. Then, you can try to understand these unfamiliar things. Hence, our aim through this *Verein* is to expand this museum. The beautiful thing about Arabic culture is that we are mutually situated in it. We have many things in common, but these things appear differently in each country. We are all connected by history, language, sometimes also by religion, but this is not our theme. Among Arabic people, there are many religions- including Christians, especially in Iraq, Syria or Egypt. They are also affected by the culture. Culture affects your life, your thinking and your behavior. So I want this Arabic culture and museum with all its beautiful branches to get bigger by connecting with the Austrian culture, or museum. Or others. We are open for all. We already have Austrian members and we hope that more will come. And they will. Because, for example, at the opening party, there were about the same number of Austrians as Arabic people. It was a big opening in a church in Lehen, Salzburg.

*Is there anything you want to add?*

I want to say something about the society in Salzburg. I have to thank them, really. I know, we are not in paradise. There are some people who are against us, but they are few. I can understand that because the media promotes some misconceptions about refugees. Many people have reacted to us negatively. But in general, society is nice. From 2015 to now it has

changed a bit. Some things changed for the better, some for the worse. But in general, people are open. I saw different cities here, but they were not open like Salzburg. With this *Verein*, I really hope to establish or pass on something to the next generation of Arabs to build on and for Austrian society to get to know more about them. For now, it looks like it will work out. The reactions of the society in Salzburg are good. But there is one big problem: the equalization of degrees.

For example, I have 19 years of experience in media. I am a teacher and have also some other qualifications. But until now, I could not use them. I think it is a pity to lose these assets and to now have to work in something I did not know anything about. It worked out, but it is hard. Why don't they use our experience? This society does not only need workers. They also need some minds. The company I am working at consists of 95% *Ausländer*. \*(4) But there are different minds. It's wonderful. If society would open up, they would have access to the areas of expertise of these people, too. It would be much better for society as a whole. The people themselves would learn, and society could make use of their experiences. I think probably more than half of the society in Salzburg were and are somehow *Ausländer* and now we live in this situation together. Different minds and an exchange of experiences would contribute to a better life for everybody. If I work in my own job, after they approve it, I will try even more because I want to be successful like I was before. It is an arena. It is a challenge and a motivation at the same time. We don't just want to be working at a *Lager* \*(5) or *Keller*. \*(6) That kills all the potential.

## //Zur Person

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Dilara Akarçeşme

Dilara Akarçeşme MA studierte Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Salzburg (Ergänzung Kulturmanagement), Boğaziçi University (TR) und BGSU (USA). Praxiserfahrungen im Kunst- und Kulturbereich an der Schnittstelle zur Politik sammelte sie u.a. im öst. Kulturforum Tel Aviv sowie im deutschen Verein *diyalog*, Istanbul. 2014-2020 war sie am PB Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kulturproduktion tätig (2017-2020 am Forschungsprojekt „Kulturelle Teilhabe in Salzburg“). Ihr Forschungsinteresse gilt Digitalisierung sowie Zugängen und Ausschlüssen in Kunst und Kultur mit Fokus auf westliche Dominanzverhältnisse.

Mehr Info

## //Zur Person

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Ayad Salim

Ayad Salim is a teacher, journalist and filmmaker. In Iraq, he worked for international media outlets for 19 years. Since January 2015, he has been living in Salzburg, where he co-created the media project *refugee.tv*. In 2020, he established



the cultural association *Arabischer Kulturverein in Salzburg* to promote cultural exchange between Arabic and Austrian members of society in Salzburg.

## //Fussnoten

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- \*1 *Verein means 'association' or 'club' in German. These types of organizations are essential for public life and civil society in Austria. Usually they are formed by people who commit themselves to a specific common activity or cause and are run by a specified member structure and statutes.*
- \*2 *Servus means 'hello' and 'goodbye' in German and is commonly used in parts of southern Germany and in Austria.*
- \*3 *'Bike kitchen'*
- \*4 *Ausländer means 'foreigner' or 'alien' in German. The word is deliberately kept in German, since it is a significant keyword used in discourses of belonging in German-speaking countries (for example, see <https://igkultur.at/artikel/der-auslaender-und-seine-erziehung>). In the meantime, migrants from the second or third generation have also critically appropriated the term Ausländer for themselves in various contexts.*
- \*5 *'Warehouse'*
- \*6 *'Cellar' or 'basement'*