

My name is Shaz Rishi, and as some of you may know, I traveled to Syria this past December along with my family for twelve days. We were in Syria to collaborate with many doctors, social workers, and members from several non-profit organizations to assess the needs of the Iraqi refugees and establish a friendship with the Syrians.

After the Iraqi War, many refugees were forced to flee to Syria with horrible injuries and losses in their families. There are roughly one million refugees right now, and most of them can't even pay for much food. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) briefed us on the current Iraqi refugee situation in Syria, which wasn't looking too good. Although some of the refugees can get access to food from the UNHCR, they often have little financial aid because of the lack of funds.

So our delegation decided to try helping them by giving them financial aid (which came from our own pockets), food, and also hope.

On the plane trip over, I constantly wondered about how different their culture would be and how I could make a difference for them. I was confident that I would do everything I could to change their lives, but I didn't expect that they would actually change mine. During my stay, I learned several life lessons from the refugees and the Syrians in general about helping others who are less fortunate than you are.

In Syria, there is a very high chance that beggars not only need to help themselves, but also their families. So when sharing some of your wealth with people in need, know that you aren't just helping them, but you're helping their family too. For example, we met a man who tried to sell us a carriage ride. We were skeptical at first because of the location, but the man was quite persistent, running as fast as he could after the car to see if we would change our minds. We admired that, so we decided to go on his carriage and we were very pleasantly surprised. The trip was very informative and we learned many things about Syria. And then we came to realize that this man is making these long trips all the time not only to help himself, but also to support his family, and feed his horse.

Another life lesson I've learned is that respecting other people's customs can allow you to have a closer connection with those people. In a strange country, you often may feel out of place or awkward because you don't know their traditions or customs. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't learn. If you respect their customs, you feel like a native, and can therefore interact with others with ease. At one of the refugee family's homes we visited, it was a custom for women to wear a *hijab* (a head covering) and for men to wear a *taqiyah* (similar to a yamaka). It would of course be disrespectful to not wear the clothing so we all did. And because we respected them, they accepted us and we felt as if we were one big family.

Our delegation visited three Iraqi refugee homes. The Mousa, the Jameel, and the Ibrahim families all have young children. . . Dhrgham, one of the sons of the Mousa family, is only seven years old, yet he is almost completely paralyzed due to one of the bombings, and he needs urgent medical attention. Abdullah, in the Jameel family, has been stricken with kidney failure also because of one of the bombings in Baghdad. [Despite these hardships] they welcomed us with open arms, and they even made us tea and cookies. We were astounded by the hospitality of all the families. These are people who have almost nothing, yet they were so pleased to see us that they didn't mind making us feel as if we were a part of the family. We learned that they appreciated the fact that we noticed their tragedies and flew all the way from America to talk to them and see if we could help.

My message to you all is don't be afraid to try and help those in need. It is important to know that by helping one person you may help an entire generation. Be willing to learn more about others' customs and traditions so you can truly understand what they need. They will accept you if they can see that you go to such great lengths to understand the tragedies that have befallen them. These lessons that I've learned have taught me to extend my goals to help those less fortunate than us. For every small step we take towards helping each person, we can move that much closer to establishing lasting friendships around the world.