



Lessons Learned from Refugees Who Resettled and Restarted Their Career

By Claire Harbour and Antoine Tirard

When we set out to discover what happens when a refugee tries to restart or re-establish a career in a new country, we never imagined the richness of stories we would find. Nor could we have anticipated how long it would take to track down those willing to tell them. The adventure has been a great lesson for us and we hope it will be for you too.

In 2019, the United Nations' World Refugee Day stated that there are almost 71 million people displaced and 37,000 forced to leave their homes daily, due to conflict or persecution. These numbers alone are a chilling indicator and there is no slowing of this trend.

Countless refugees leave jobs and professions, studies and dreams, to find themselves in environments that are not easy to navigate or understand, where they need to reconstruct not only their lives, but their careers. We wanted to understand what this looks like in reality, and how it feels; what inspires and what discourages these asylum seekers, and what kind of support professionals like us can offer to this vast group who want and need to exercise their right to work, but may not know how to do so in a new place.

What follows is four stories, at different stages of progress, which we hope will move you as much as they do us. There is much to learn at


Name
Tey

Originally from
Kuwait, Syria

Resettled to
Lebanon,
The Netherlands

Studied
Business management, Digital
currencies

Career vision
Turn invisible people into invincible
ones, through his work in a tech
company, and as writer and speaker



multiple levels and an opportunity for you, our reader, to become more aware and to seek out the local places that are supporting and encouraging refugees on their career reconstruction.

Tey, from warzones to crypto-currencies

When he was five, Tey left Kuwait with his Syrian father to move to Lebanon while his mother left, returning to the U.S. with his baby sister, as is the tradition in divorcing Muslim families. From that day on, he lived in warzones. Tey remembers having no toys other than rocks to throw, and the frequent sound of jets and rockets overhead.

Studies in a top Lebanese university allowed him to find consulting work, advising on development programs for the city of Beirut. Around the assassination of the country's prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, Tey woke up to the workings of international peace courts. His conscience was awakened to the futility of the work he was doing "as the bag-carrier for rich Saudis, trying to decide which restaurant to open". So he decided to move to Dubai.

Here, his earlier experience counted for nothing and his Syrian passport was a handicap. So he was reduced to folding jeans in a boutique, and crying himself to sleep at night. However, Tey decided to build on his skills, learning more foreign languages so he could better communicate with the international

clients, and quickly being promoted to assistant store manager. Unfortunately, during an ideological discussion with his boss, he lost his temper and ended up jobless.

Tey next secured a role with the Dubai telecoms operator, Du, as a trainer in the company's early growth stages. He became excited about the possibilities of tech and communication changing lives. He started to train the sales teams while increasing his circle of influence and getting inspired by the company's strategy to offer "per second" billing, thus attracting the Kingdom's poor laborer community. Through this role, Tey was invited by a Dutch CEO to train his people in the Netherlands. The culture shock as Tey left behind "skyscrapers and Lamborghinis, to find bicycles, trees, old cars, tall people and small houses" was profound. As the Syrian crisis was escalating, he negotiated a job offer with work visa, and arrived in The Hague full of hope for the future.

Over the next four years, Tey worked hard and enjoyed the fair conditions of the working environment in his host country. He particularly appreciated the non-hierarchical aspects, and the openness of the Dutch, compared to Dubai. However, this all came to an end when his contract was not renewed. His boss "off the record" recommended that he consider requesting asylum and Tey took advice from lawyers who suggested it would be "a simple process".

One day in September 2014, Tey applied for asylum, along with 50,000 others also waiting to be processed. The next day he found himself sleeping on the cold floor of a detention center, relieved of his ID, all documentation, with nothing other than the clothes he stood up in, and his mobile phone and charger, which he had managed to hide. He knew a mistake had been made, but could do nothing about it, and thus began a process of unimaginable length. His lawyer had said "8 weeks max" and yet, 3 months in, he found himself one of the first few members of a refugee community sleeping in 44 bunk beds in a music hall in central Netherlands.

The conditions were challenging for Tey: most campmates were unused to living with Western habits, so the toilets were constantly filthy and

some people used the space under his bed to pray. Unfazed, Tey used his Bitcoin account to order a large box of Syrian food from the market in The Hague, and organized a dinner for 20. This quickly made him the “king of the camp”. Everyone was curious about how he could have used his phone to order and pay for food. Tey had money and access to products in demand: from here, he became a supplier of food, drink and cigarettes to all those who could pay. “I was treated like a military commander!”

Following the hierarchy of needs, the campmates became interested in more than food or consumption: they wanted work. Tey helped them to get jobs locally as gardeners or cooks, or whatever casual, simple roles could be arranged. At the same time he took online courses on cryptocurrency. He did so well that he was able to find a well-paid contract as consultant to one of the currency platforms and received a scholarship to do a Master’s course in Digital Currencies. Now he was “the Jeff Bezos of the camp”. He realized that self-study was the key, advising all the enquiring minds around him to do the same or similar. In February 2015, he was awarded his residency permit. At this point, he was able to move to another camp, awaiting a housing solution, and continuing the creative journey of entrepreneurship, setting up his company, Tykn, as soon as he had a stable internet connection in that new camp.

Tey uncovered the possibilities offered by the micro-economy, and what he shows to be a win-win. The Netherlands gains new skills, whether these be for making pita bread or plumbing a bathroom, and the refugee creates a link and an identity with the new host country. He has helped thousands to do this, and, now he is in his own home in The Hague. He has global ambitions for the same pattern, planning to harvest the power of these disenfranchised groups, and giving them the opportunity to create value for economies, while regaining their dignity, their identity and their ability to survive autonomously. His role is to drive the vehicle that permits a matching of supply and demand, and to take that vehicle around the world. We look forward to following Tey’s

Name
Eduardo

Originally from
Honduras

Resettled to
Spain, USA

Studied
**Computer science,
Telecommunications**

Career vision
**Apply software engineering knowledge
and experience and develop new skills
to be better every day**



progress, as it seems nothing will stop him.

Eduardo, fleeing Honduras to seek a new life in the U.S.

Eduardo lived his childhood in Honduras in a peaceful and loving family, but the fact that his older brother was severely epileptic strained relationships and finances constantly. The outside world was a different matter, however, and he was regularly held up, chased and extorted, due to the overall insecurity in his country. While the lawlessness weighed heavy, Eduardo played the role of the responsible son, studying hard in high school, and working part-time as he could, with a first job at a telecom laboratory. Here, he was able to get into “finding out what was under the hood”; he did coding and loved the logic. He started studies in systems engineering at the Technical University of Honduras, all the time keeping up his career in electronics, and helping out at home, as his mother had, by now, left to live and work in Spain, in the hope of better supporting the family from there.

As the conditions in Honduras worsened, Eduardo felt compelled to seek a rosier future elsewhere. The family bought him an airline ticket to Barcelona, where he joined his mother. Of course, this meant dropping out of his university course and leaving behind his job, so he needed to start over in his new city. His mother was delighted to have the company, as well as help for her business, cleaning and preparing AirBnB apartments. Eduardo worked



in the mornings, and studied for university entrance exams in the afternoons. And all of this without a work permit. But he was confident that he was a good person, and respected the police, so felt that if ever he were to be stopped, he could talk his way out of trouble.

Eduardo made friends and felt welcome, and life continued happily for mother and son, especially when he gained his place at Barcelona's Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, for which he now needed to learn Catalan. But, once again, he took things in his stride and mastered the language. As he studied, he worked, gaining internships and part time work in a multitude of organizations, from hospitals to marketing consultancies. The continuing lack of a complete set of official papers was occasionally a problem. There was a point when his mother lost her job, Eduardo could not assemble the right documentation, and he needed to switch to a different education route in order to continue. But he just continued to adapt to the prevailing conditions and moved forward.

The persistence paid off, and Eduardo was officially granted residency in Spain after a few years. His ability to work in increasingly stable and developmental jobs in the IT field took a leap forward. He has been gone for a total of eight years from Honduras, and he has not been "home" once, admitting that he feels that he no longer belongs there in any way, and that

he regularly begs his sister and her family to come to Spain. However, Spain is not Eduardo's final destination, as a weird, positive twist came up in his story.

A few years ago, as he was studying English online, he met an American woman. As they exchanged language classes with each other, and, as they practiced grammar every day, they gradually fell in love. And this past summer, they were married. Eduardo is now back in the Americas, and living in Boise, the capital city of Idaho, with his wife and new family.

Daily routine now consists of more study – another degree online, plus ongoing tech education on LinkedIn Learning and Harvard-MIT's edX – as well as the endless paperwork required to secure his U.S. residency and to obtain the right kind of job locally. Eduardo had a dream job in Barcelona before he left, and had built up more than 5 years of work experience officially, not to mention the rest, and now needs to navigate the work market in his area, to find a fit between them. He wants to continue to grow, as well as to share his knowledge, and is considering trying to find a route towards teaching.

Eduardo's advice for others on this winding road of migration? "Develop skills that are transferable, and master English!" His consistent dedication to lifelong learning is an example to us all. He also reminds us that English transformed his life in more ways than one: it got him a job and a happy marriage. While not all will be

able to aspire to that double whammy, it makes good sense for most.

Mutaz, the Sudanese engineer turning entrepreneur in Europe

When he was ten, Mutaz dreamed of being the sort of inventor who could create a series of extraordinary machines and innovations. His life has turned out, so far, to be full of reinvention. Raised in Saudi Arabia, with his accountant father, a Sudanese who was “no longer welcome” in his home country, Mutaz held on to his big dreams all through high school, planning on studying computer science. However, the first obstacle to this was that universities in Saudi Arabia did not accept students from other countries, regardless of how long they had been resident. So he chose to return to Sudan, and get to know his country and grandparents better than a few holidays had ever allowed. He finally elected to study Architectural Engineering at Sudan University of Science and Technology, thanks to the wise words of his father, who recommended following his passion rather than common sense. Helped along by his imagination, he graduated five years later, and then accomplished the obligatory national service, which was done, in his case, as an engineer in a municipality team taking care of flood prevention around a Khartoum district.

Having taken care of the paperwork involved in officially being a graduate, Mutaz chose to return to Saudi Arabia in 2009. He got his first job as an architect in a firm that was planning a new city, 700 km north of Riyadh. He got involved in partnerships, masterplans and all kinds of other exciting aspects, and felt absolutely certain of his choice to pursue his vocation. For the next eight years, he progressed in seniority, making astute moves from one firm to another, until he was running large projects for both local and multinational companies.

In 2017, he was inspired to study for an MBA, as he had big ideas for creating a business of his own, and found an enterprising way to begin this in Riyadh. But as the revolution was brewing in Sudan, in 2018, he found himself engaged

Name
Mutaz

Originally from
Sudan,
Saudi Arabia

Resettled to
The Netherlands

Studied
Computer science, Architectural
engineering

Career vision
Launch a new hospitality business to
accommodate digital nomads



in some of the protests in Khartoum and ended up in jail for a few weeks. As a result, he missed his “window” of time to return to Saudi Arabia, so, despite having managed to escape the worst of imprisonment, he could not return to his former life. This was when his inventiveness was fully called upon. He slipped out of Khartoum, passport in hand, crossed the border into Ethiopia, in the hope of negotiating a return to his life in Riyadh. However, the embassy gave him little reason for optimism, indicating that the only choice he had left was to obtain the support of his local “sponsor”, who was not answering Mutaz’s calls.

At this point, Mutaz was stuck and also sick with parasites, so he decided to take up his sister’s invitation to join her in Germany, where she had lived for years. Luckily he held a Schengen visa, so was able to fly to Amsterdam, which was the cheapest destination close to his sister’s place. After a few weeks with his family, he was still angling for a return to Riyadh, but finally learned from his Saudi sponsor that there was no hope of this. This was the end of the road and Mutaz decided to ask for asylum in Europe. However, this needed to be done in the country he had first entered, so in July 2018, he travelled to Amsterdam, handed in his papers, and made the request.

It has been a long hard process and Mutaz is still awaiting its completion, but his time has not been idle. He found a course and a cunning solution for getting it funded, at Utrecht University, that allowed him to continue his


Name
Rahaf

Originally from
Syria

Resettled to
The Netherlands

Studied
**Business management,
Economic development**

Career vision
**Work with her partner and husband
to create new type of healthy coffee,
fully free of caffeine**



business education. During this course, he was inspired to explore the idea of setting up accommodation for digital nomads, which is an under-served market in the Netherlands. His market segmentation and research skills were honed by the course, and his imagination and opportunism set the course for a new project. Having signed up for the program at Forward Incubator, a startup empowering newcomers to launch, fund, and grow their own businesses, he has refined the concept further, and is currently seeking out premises in Amsterdam, while preparing his pitch for financing next January.

The big dream for Mutaz is to create a business that makes sense and gives not just him, but a host of other stakeholders a “second chance”. Obtaining a permit for any “tourist” accommodation in Amsterdam is now subject to extremely demanding conditions, but that suits him, as he actively wants to rehabilitate an old industrial building, and to employ other immigrants or disadvantaged people. Making the whole place into a social venture with an environmentally small footprint fits his ethos totally, and he plans even to direct a portion of the profits to startups in Africa. He is aiming for sustainability in every sense, never having read a trendy article about the concept, just feeling it in his bones.

Mutaz has two major pieces of advice for those contemplating a similar path: education and passion. He saw “too many people in the camp, just waiting, doing nothing”, while he

knows that his progress is thanks to more courses, more learning, more curiosity. He also recommends hustling: “Jump over the obstacles, be smart and look for alternatives. Find solutions, and never give up.” As for passion - his father’s wise words all those years ago set him up well, and his instincts have always driven him to do what he loves, or what he believes in. This is applicable to all, Mutaz believes. He sees that progress is made when there is energy behind the objective, and advises future migrants to use whatever ideas and passions they have to build their own futures as best they can.

Rahaf, the long road from Damascus to Amsterdam

Rahaf grew up in a traditional home in Damascus, and began her university degree in Business Administration just one year before war broke out. She was extremely hardworking and not easily scared, so she kept up her studies, despite hearing bombing and shelling not far away, and there being only one hour or so of electricity per day. Wrapped in warm blankets in the lecture theatres, she watched as her fellow students were arrested, or as tanks pulled up alongside buses. Nothing put this young woman off her quest to learn.

During her final year, she took on a position in a call center, as she was keen to build her CV before graduating, and began applying the rudiments of business to reality, despite not being paid. At the same time, the family was reeling from the various blows war had brought to them, including the bombing and destruction of her mother’s pharmacy as well as one of her father’s furniture factories. By the time she had graduated, Rahaf needed to create revenues as well as pleasure and development from her work. Using a friendly contact already working there, she applied for a data job in a Danish NGO’s procurement department. She entered as a volunteer, soon proved her worth, and began to earn a salary.

A couple of years later, Rahaf started to cast around for opportunities to continue her career beyond the frontiers of Syria. She came across an international NGO in Turkey, where she thought she could add value, and where she might be able to live more safely and freely. The CV she sent for

consideration was reviewed by a young man called Tamim. He was so impressed by her degree, high grades, work experience and determination that, not only did he get right back to her to arrange an interview, but he fell in love with her on the spot. Within a few days, the two had conversed intensely, and he announced to her that he would be sending his parents from their remote village to visit her parents in the capital, so that they could ask permission for him to marry her.

The romance was beautiful and real, but fraught with challenges. How and where could they actually meet? Or aspire to live and work? Their first joint vision was to emigrate to Canada. However the hurdles were too high so they gave up on Canada, and decided to use further education as a vehicle for mobility. Both of them were successful in being awarded Erasmus scholarships for anywhere in Europe, and Rahaf chose to go to Santiago de Compostela in the far north west of Spain.

At this point, they had still not met physically, but talked as often as patchy electricity and internet connections would allow. They had also managed to use the Syrian environment to be “married” – on paper, and legally, at least. However, that did not allow them to get around the next challenge, which was that Tamim had no documentation in Turkey, so Spain would not grant him a visa to join Rahaf, despite several attempts. So, Rahaf finished her master’s degree alone, her dreams that her husband would join her dashed to pieces.

And then came the decision of where to go and develop her career next. The time had come to ask for asylum, and build a proper life somewhere they could both be for the long term. The most logical choice was the Netherlands, with its reputation for open arms. So in the Autumn of 2018, she travelled to Amsterdam, handed in her documents, and went through the asylum-seeking process. The camp was not too arduous, but the wait for her husband to join her nearly drove her crazy. She finished up her master’s thesis alone while there, and felt desolate on not being able to share this victory with anyone dear to her. Eventually, Tamim spent all of his savings to be



trafficked to Europe, and at the end of March this year, the couple were able to hold each other close for the first time, over three years after they had met.

Now Rahaf and Tamim are both out of the refugee camp, almost fully integrated into society in the Netherlands, and they are working on their joint professional dream. Rahaf had an idea for a business burning away inside her for years. She wasted no time in signing up for a refugee incubator, on arrival in Amsterdam. She is launching her business, thanks to Forward Incubator, where she gets training, coaching and help to pitch for funding.

A serendipitous series of events led Rahaf to discover a new, caffeine-free coffee substitute from date seeds. Now she has the chance to develop and market this tasty product crafted from waste. They are working on a strategy to begin by producing and packaging the product for wholesale and retail sales in the Netherlands, and then hope to create their own chain of cafés, where the date seed coffee will be sold. They are grappling with various challenges currently, including the fact that date seed coffee does not feature on any official list of foodstuffs in the EU, so they cannot register it as such without the help of a lawyer. And then, they need the logo and the website. But they will get there! Their smiles, gratitude and optimism are opening doors every day, and the likelihood of their dream coming true is finally high.

The pitch meetings will be in January. Forward Incubator will do their job of attracting the right potential investors, and the business will no doubt soar. What they lack in business management experience, they both make up for

Seven Lessons We Can All Learn from Refugees Who Restarted Their Careers

1. Adversity is the mother of invention
2. When stuck, be smart and look for alternatives, never stop moving forward
3. Education and self-study is key; be curious and seek learning in all kinds of ways
4. Develop skills that are transferable and master English
5. Use whatever ideas and passions you have to build your future as best you can
6. Do not assume you need perfect conditions to start up a great company
7. Optimism and self-belief are key to any success, wherever you are coming from

with tons of natural leadership and guts.

The message the couple wants to pass on to others is that of remaining positive and optimistic. They have survived such hardship themselves, and always found solutions, and so their conclusion is that the challenges actually made better people of them. “Never stop moving forward” is their leitmotiv, and their joyful attitude to everything will no doubt allow that to happen. This sage philosophy would be useful to apply to everyone, and not just refugees or asylum seekers.

There are, of course, endless other stories that we could tell. You may have friends, connections and acquaintances who know individuals like those we have shown. But, one thing they have in common, without any doubt, is that they are part of a vast and growing number, who face the challenge of “what next?”. Not in the privileged way that most of our other subjects have done, but in a brutal, fundamental

sense, which leaves many less sturdy souls powerless.

There are universal lessons in these stories and compelling advice for those who might be in similarly dire situations, as well as for those who choose to help them. Let us commend you to be moved by at least one of these characters’ stories, and to undertake some sort of support, whether by offering help, employment, financing or more to a refugee near you. People like Tey, Eduardo, Mutaz, Rahaf and Tamim are everywhere. You do not need to look very hard, if you choose to try. It is the festive season of giving, after all – at least in some cultures and countries.

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