



Syrian refugees from Minbej, nine-year-old Mostafa Abdallah (right) and thirteen-year-old Hanadi Al-Hajj Abdallah (center) film a scene with their friends in Beirut's southern suburb of Shatila as part of a refugee program called the Refugee Film Project. — AFP photos

# Syrian refugee kids in Lebanon act, direct, 'escape'

*'When I play, I feel like a huge star'*



Eleven-year-old Syrian refugee Mostafa Abdallah from the Syrian town of Minbej films his friends.

Three, two, one, action! shouts Syrian refugee Mostafa Abdallah, 11, energetically directing his fellow child actors in a musical being filmed in a Palestinian camp in the Lebanese capital. Members of the cast spring into action, belting out a chaotic but charming rendition of a traditional Arabic folk song about love and loss, accompanied by tambourines. The musical is part of the Refugee Film Project, an initiative by international organization SB OverSeas that is helping Syrian refugee children in Lebanon write, direct and act in their own short movies.

Since Syria's conflict erupted in 2011, its children have often been center stage in heartbreaking images capturing the brutality of the war or the tragedy of the ensuing refugee crisis. But the Refugee Film Project aims to turn the camera around, giving young refugees the chance to shape their own stories—including from behind the camera. Every day for six weeks, around 30 child actors gathered in front of the Bokra Ahla (A Better Tomorrow) NGO, which provides education services in Shatila, a Palestinian camp in Beirut. Mostafa turns away from the digital

camera just long enough to tell AFP: "In the past, I used to film from my cellphone. But here, we learned how to film on camera—we learn a ton and have so much fun."

A year and a half ago, he and his family fled the northern Syrian town of Manbij, held at the time by the Islamic State group, and eventually made their way across the border into Lebanon. More than one million Syrians—including over 500,000 children—are registered in Lebanon as refugees.

#### Green screens, storyboards

Many live in informal camps on agricultural land, but others settled in urban Palestinian camps like Shatila, whose original population of 10,000 people has swelled with the arrivals of Syrians fleeing the conflict. Gangly Mostafa is a natural director, giving firm commands to his peers. "I hope that when I grow up I can be a real director and journalist, and I can teach children how to use a camera," he says. The project has already produced several films, including a horror story about three witches and "Betrayal in Beirut," a six-minute tale of love, kidnapping, and greed. It is the brainchild of British teacher



Nine-year-old Syrian refugee Tahani Al-Shaalan from the Syrian town of Minbej films her friends who are acting in Beirut's southern suburb of Shatila.

Aphra Evans, 24, and filmmaker Shyam Jones, 25, who work with the children to come up with storyboards and scripts. "Then we come to school and organize the kids to act, use the camera, and... rehearse their lines," says Jones.

The children have been taught technical skills such as adjusting camera exposure and focus, shooting fake fight scenes and using a green screen. Once shooting is complete, "we edit the film at home and show it to the kids, then they get to see themselves on screen being little actors," says Jones, who was on his first trip to Lebanon. The short films will then be incorporated into a broader documentary that Jones says will provide a behind-the-scenes look at "real life in Shatila".

#### Flipping the camera around

"There's always a Western lens looking at the kids, and we wanted to turn that around and have the kids in control of the photograph and in control of the video to change things a little bit," says organizer Evans. The children are able to escape the grim reality of camps like Shatila while filming, Evans says, while viewers are

impressed by the actors' enthusiasm, creativity and unexplored talent. "You're always seeing the kids covered in dust in Aleppo. That's not what these kids are like—that's something that happened to them, but then they have a whole lifetime after that moment," says Evans.

Thirteen-year-old Hanadi Al-Hajj Abdallah is one of those children. Her fingernails painted a firetruck-red, she plucks at her oud—the pear-shaped stringed instrument beloved in the Arab world. "We're using the oud in our scene today, and this is the first time I've played it on camera. When I play, I feel like a huge star," Hanadi tells AFP. Hanadi, who is wearing a burundy headscarf and loose dress over denim trousers, fled her home near Damascus four years ago. The multi-talented teen even performs Syrian rap songs, including "People did you wrong" by rapper Ismail Tamer. "This song is about war, shelling, and destruction—it's about Syria," Hanadi says. She steadily recites the lyrics that she and her brother memorized together: "People did you wrong, they destroyed you. When they saw your beauty, they envied you so much." — AFP



Thirteen-year-old Syrian refugee Hanadi Al-Hajj Abdallah (center) from the Syrian town of Minbej sings with friends while being filmed in Beirut's southern suburb of Shatila.

## Bizarre News

### Grandmother becomes internet hit with comedic resignation letter

A grandmother has become an internet sensation because of her comedic resignation letter. Marlene from Glasgow decided to quit her cleaning job and in her letter informing her boss at her cleaning job Mr MacGillivray she vented her frustration towards him, and wished him luck finding "some other mug to clean the place", according to The Daily Mirror newspaper. Marlene wrote: "The job's c\*\*\* and I'm leaving. I'll no be back after June 30. Canny wait. "Good luck getting some other mug to clean the place. Cheerio.(sic)" Marlene's granddaughter Kaitlyn McGrory shared a picture on Twitter of the message, and her honest grandparent was dubbed a "legend" by social media users who retweeted the post.

### Elvis Presley's hair sells for £1,000

Elvis Presley's hair has reportedly been sold for £1,000. A lock of hair belonging to the late 'Jailhouse Rock' hitmaker, which was believed to have been obtained by his personal barber Homer Gill Gilleland, was a huge hit at a Catawiki auction and was snapped up for the large sum forty years after the singer's death. Mark Borgman, a worker at the auction, told the Metro newspaper: "For fans and super-fans of music icons, there is the assumption that if you own a lock of hair that once belonged to someone famous, you would feel like you own a part of them forever."

### Loch Ness Monster alive? New video emerges of legendary Nessy

New footage of the Loch Ness monster has emerged online. The mythical creature which inhabits Loch Ness in Scotland has been spotted by a YouTuber, who posted video footage of the monster's head and neck bobbing up and down in the choppy waters of the famous lake. The footage shows a boat sailing past and not taking any notice of legendary Nessy. Excited voices can be heard over on the video, shot on May 7, suggesting that there were other witnesses to the sighting other than the camera-person. The video was uploaded by Sweetie, who asked in the description: "What the hell was it? Did anyone else see it?" However, YouTube users weren't convinced and one commented: "Just a piece of wood or something."

### Lawson likes her tea 'strong and milky'

Nigella Lawson likes her tea "strong but milky". The brunette beauty stars in the new Typhoo advert and discovers the nation's favourite way to drink the delicious brew in a series of scenes, including in the back of a London black taxi and in a tent on a stormy mountainside. A miniature sized Nigella is then seen sipping Typhoo from a giant mug while looking around for a slice of cake, and is wearing an eye-popping red dress in the promo video. The 57-year-old chef admitted she has a ritual when it comes to her own cuppa, revealing: "I often drink my tea with the teabag still in the mug." And she confessed she might struggle to share if she found herself with only two teabags left. She added: "I have a terrible feeling that I might keep both for myself. "But if there were anyone near me gasping for a cuppa, I'd like to think that actually I'd give it away happily." Typhoo CEO Somanth Saha is delighted to have the celebrity chef on board and added: "We're so happy to have Nigella - a genuine Typhoo lover - working with us again. "We all know the perfect cup of tea is a very personal thing, and everyone's taste is different. "This campaign celebrates those subtle, but significant, preferences." The 30-second advert debuts on TV screens on May 12 and will be shown during "Take Me Out" on Saturday on ITV.

### Teenager goes to prom in a coffin

A student turned up to her prom in a coffin. Megan Flaherty, 17, from New Jersey wore a stunning blue dress with her hair in an elegant updo to her junior prom, but decided to make a unique entrance by turning up in a wooden box, a decision she made based on her dreams of becoming a funeral director. The student was driven in the ceremony by a hearse, and carried out of the box to be greeted by her prom date Stephen Caldwell. She told NJ.com: "I made sure my prom date was OK with it. "I don't think they were really processing it. I'm a quiet person in school, so people didn't expect it." And speaking about backlash she received for her decision, she added: "Anything people do these days, people judge it. "People have opinions." — Bang Showbiz



This handout computer generated image released by CARTIVATOR Resource Management yesterday shows the flying car dubbed 'SkyDrive'. — AFP

## Riding high: Toyota eyes 'flying car' future

Toyota has its sights set on a Blade Runner future as the Japanese automaker backs a move to launch a flying car in time for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. The company is giving about 42.5 million yen (\$375,000) to the Cartivator project, which is developing the three-wheeled sci-fi car that relies on drone technology to take flight. The manned vehicle, dubbed SkyDrive, will have four sets of propellers and at 2.9 meters (9.5 foot) long and 1.3 meters wide—is aiming to be the world's smallest flying car, according to the project.

A promotional video graphic shows the little car lowering its retractable wings before zipping off for a flight around Tokyo and then lighting the flame at the Olympic stadium. The car is expected to have a top flight speed of around 100 kilometers (62 miles) an hour, hovering some 10 meters off the ground. It will have a top land speed around 150 kilometers an hour. — AFP