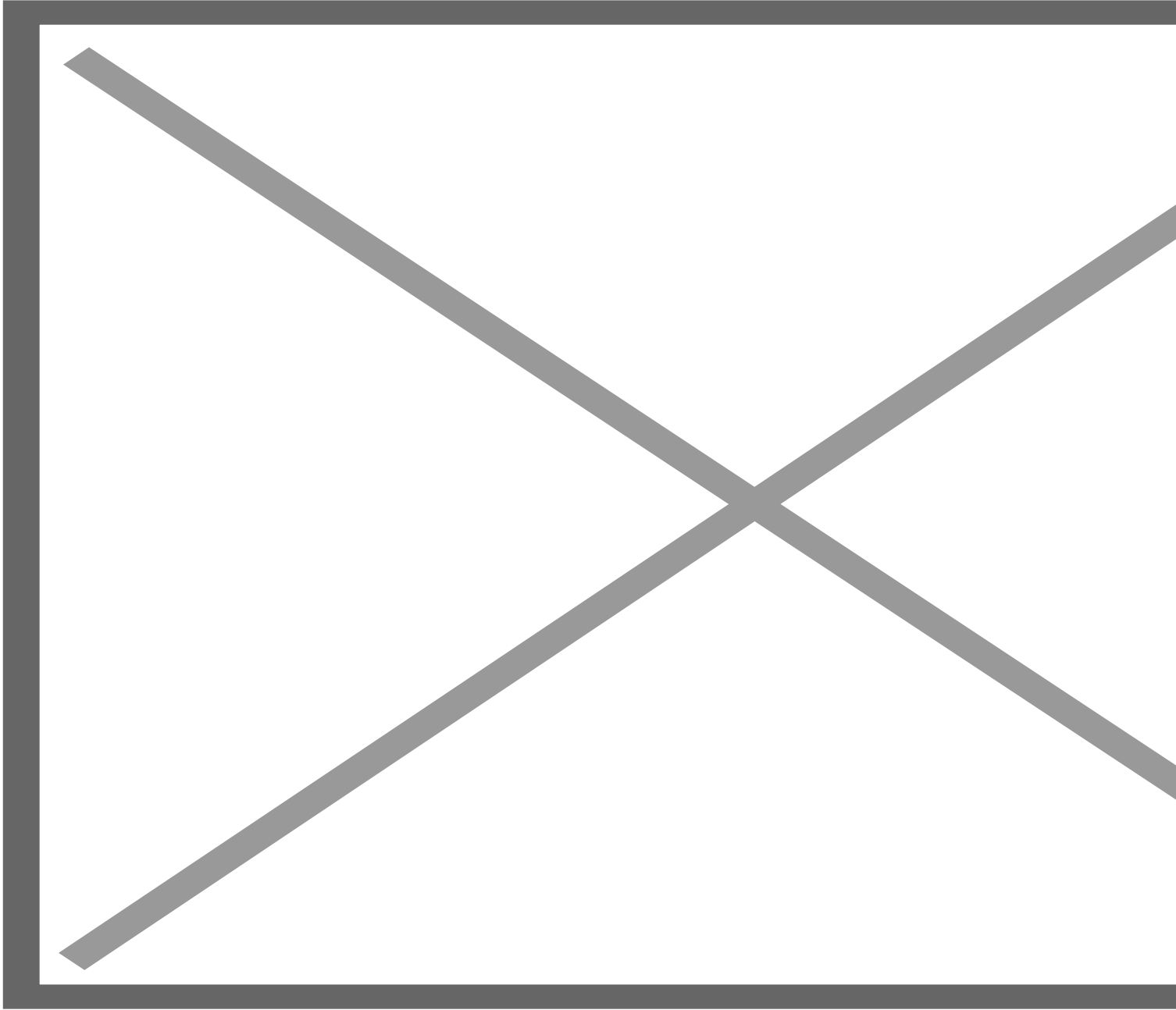


Strangers no more

The compassion of Iraqi and Syrian migrants I've met has transformed me—and challenged my vocabulary.

by [Stephanie Saldaña](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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Sources images: Getty

I am haunted by the dead who sleep beneath waters. There are so many of them by now. Mothers and fathers, small children, young boys who were journeying with the hopes of sending back money to their families. I am haunted by the photos they carried, of brothers and sisters, neighbors and childhood loves. By their voices, their languages.

People are dying at a terrifying rate on migration routes around the world. A recent report by the International Organization for Migration estimated that 82,000 human beings have drowned or disappeared since 2014. In January and February of 2026 alone, there were 600 migrant deaths at sea. And people are not only dying in the water. Six people were recently found dead in a railway car in Texas, the youngest only 14 years old.

I am scared for my own children. I am frightened that they will grow up in a world in which 82,000 human beings can die or disappear, their deaths met with so much silence.

This is a personal story for me. Years ago, while I was researching a book about Iraqis and Syrians who escaped war, I traveled across the world, meeting people and listening to their stories. I learned about the mulberry trees people left behind, their soil, their songs. I remember traveling to the Greek island of Lesbos when migrants were being held there in terrible conditions. I speak Arabic but not Greek, and the young Iraqis and Syrians I met shared their food with me, gave me directions, calmed me. Later, when I traveled to Germany to write about Yazidis who had escaped genocide, the same thing happened. I do not speak German, and these Iraqi “strangers” gave me directions in the Arabic we shared, offered me food, helped me read train schedules. They became my port of call.

Many remain friends. When war broke out in the Holy Land where I live, they called to ask about my children. Their compassion transformed me. It also challenged my vocabulary.

In church discourse, we often refer to people who migrate as “strangers.”

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,” is a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) I’ve often heard cited from the pulpit. “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:21, KJV) is another beloved by preachers, inviting us to be kind to those seeking sanctuary.

Increasingly, this framing no longer corresponds with what I’ve lived. People who migrate aren’t strangers. They’re neighbors.

There is a narrative violence to forever relegating anyone to the category of “stranger.” It is to seal their otherness as fact, to forever exile them from our intimate circle. It is a failure of imagination. At best, we might assist them, but so long as they are strangers, we can never truly know them.

I recently reread the story of the good Samaritan. I was struck for the first time by the premise that prompts Jesus’ telling of the parable. A man asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” His question is a recognition of how much is at stake in the words that we use and what we believe them to mean. They frame our choices.

Jesus’ answer turns the question on its head, inviting us to become neighbors, so that each person—and everything in creation—becomes relational to us. Neighborliness calls us to an integral life of loving and caring for one another. That mercy is so vast that the person standing next to us and the mother crossing the sea are both of our concern.

Love makes everyone proximate. So I also wonder if we might interrogate our descriptions of people as being on “the margins” or “the periphery.” When Pope Francis popularized these terms, speaking of the church as a field hospital and asking us to de-center ourselves and reach out to the poor, to migrants, and to others left out of our discourse, it was a call to humility. Yet increasingly we use such terms as a statement of fact about migrants and other groups. To narrate our faith as though we occupy the center is to obscure one of the most radical tenets of Christianity, which is that those whom society ignores are at the very center of God’s concern. The people who are crossing borders are at the heart of the gospels. God calls us to join them there.

One more term I’ve been trying to unlearn when I speak about our relationship to people who migrate is the verb “to help.” In my years of listening to migration stories, I often learned that the story I had assumed was about other people was also about me. Perhaps, as in the case of Iraqis fleeing war, my country had once invaded theirs. Others were escaping failing crops brought on by climate change created in large part by the most developed countries, including my own. As an American who also holds European citizenship, I learned that people are taking longer and more dangerous routes because of laws that makes safe passage almost impossible.

They taught me that, if we look long enough, accompanying migrants is rarely about helping anyone but almost always about restorative justice. It is a collective responsibility. To recognize that, we must be willing to confront the devastating global effects our policies have and to recognize that we all inhabit a common story.

I once watched a TedX interview with Sara Mardini, a Syrian swimmer and lawyer who escaped war to find safety in Europe. Eventually, she decided to return to Lesbos to serve as a volunteer. On her first day of orientation, the new volunteers were told, “If you believe that you are a hero or you are saving anyone’s life, we have a wide door. Leave.” She credits those words with restoring her dignity.

The language we use matters. It is also a place from which to begin. In these warm months, historically the deadliest time of the year for migration, it is easy to feel that there is nothing that we can do. But we can begin by paying attention to the words we speak, a first step in changing who we see and the choices we make. No more strangers, just neighbors. No more helping. Just love.