



From Tent to Makeshift Housing

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KAMEL DORAÏ + PAULINE PIRAUD-FOURNET

From Tent to Makeshift Housing: A Case Study of a Syrian Refugee in Zaatari Camp (Jordan)

Zaatari refugee camp, a makeshift city built by refugees

Strict regulations have been imposed in the Syrian refugee camps in order to avoid any form of permanent settlement. Despite these constraints, a city has emerged out of the dynamism of its inhabitants. As soon as the camp opened, an informal economy developed throughout the different neighbourhoods of the camp. From the main entry gate, a shopping street developed (Fig. 1), with many shops of all kinds: mobile phone shops, clothing and wedding dress stores, groceries, bakeries, small restaurants, hairdressers and so on. Street vendors stroll around the camp selling all kinds of products or sandwiches. Close to many facilities established by NGOs, this shopping street is frequented by a large number of refugees. It has become a central living space symbolizing their economic dynamism.

The refugees have partly gathered by family and village of origin. Prefabricated structures and tents have been progressively reorganised to create living areas that, although precarious, have enabled people to have their own private living space. Today, five years after the opening of the camp, there are almost no tents left, except as an extension to prefabricated living structure or to cover the inner courtyard of the housing. The materials distributed by the humanitarian agencies are reused and transformed by residents. The camp is not anymore a juxtaposition of standardised settlements. Instead, some of the refugees recreate traditional forms of housing that are fairly similar to those in Southern Syria or in the informal neighbourhoods in the outskirts of large Syrian cities. In these makeshift and freestanding shelters, two spaces have a special status and play an important social role: the room where guests are received (*madhafeh* in Arabic) and the courtyard, as an outdoor living area and a lock between the street and the home. People from outside the family can gather in the *madhafeh*, where mattresses are arranged on the floor, thus serving as a meeting room for men. The women, meanwhile, gather in the courtyard to cook together, or in adjoining rooms where they talk.

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(الدرن) البريقي مجتمه في سورتي لحيه حاليه رساله

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Case study - Faysal's family in Zaatari camp

During regular visits in Zaatari camp between 2012 and 2017, we interviewed several refugee families and conducted housing surveys. This revealed some aspects of refugees' daily life, the problems they face and the coping strategies they developed to circumvent restrictions and economic difficulties.

Faysal, his wife and four children left Bosra in October 2012. At this time, informal crossing point were still open between Syria and Jordan. Similar to all the refugees who entered Jordan after July 2012, the family was directed towards the Zaatari refugee camp. In May 2017, they were resettled in France and left the camp.

In Syria, Faysal lived with his parents, brothers and family in a small house in the ancient and medieval town centre of Bosra. Each family had a room set around a small courtyard. A large garden next to the house belonged to the family. In October 2012, Faysal, two of his brothers and their families were forced to leave Bosra because of the war. Upon their arrival in the Zaatari camp in October 2012, the family was given a tent by the UNHCR in the third district (Fig. 2, n°1). Sometimes, several families had to share

one of these tents - almost 6m long and 4m wide, 24 m². At that time, the kitchens and the sanitary blocks (showers, toilets, laundry) were collective and built in concrete. Because of the lack of space inside the tents, families used to spend a significant part of their daily life in the only space available, the streets; the tent was used for eating meals, as a bedroom and a *madhafeh*. A few months later, refugees began to transform their tents by themselves, adding a wood-



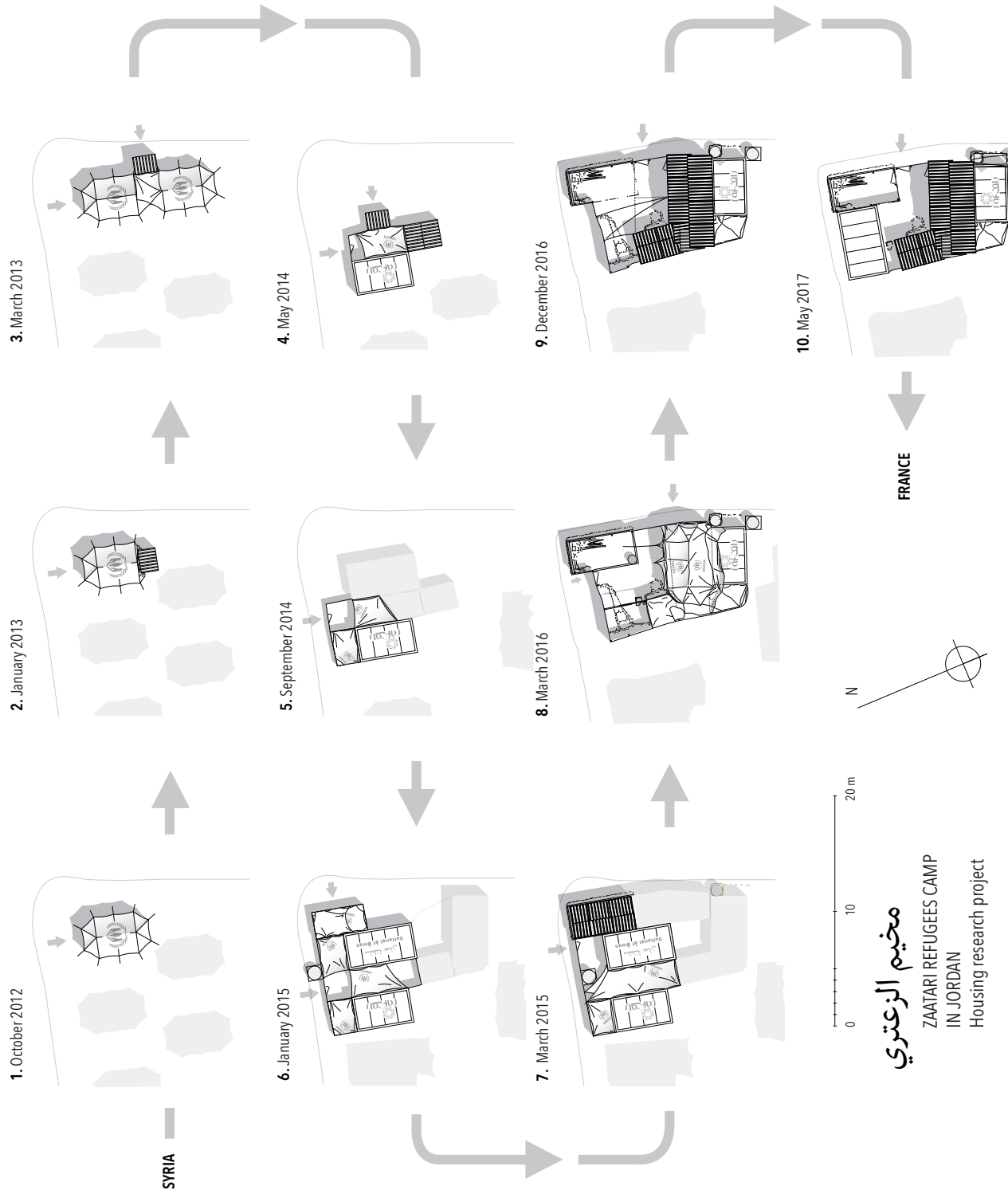
1. Zaatari. The main street of the camp, called Shari, in 2017 (P. Piraud-Fournet 2017).
مخيم الزعتري، الشارع الرئيسي الذي يبيع شارع السوق في 2017 (ب. بيرة - فورنييه 2017)

الزعتري (الزعتري) مخيم اللاجئين السوريين في الأردن. في أكتوبر 2012، تم إرسال فaisal وأسرته وأربعة أطفال إلى المخيم. في البداية، تم توزيع الخيام على اللاجئين. كانت الخيام صغيرة جدًا، حوالي 6 أمتار في الطول و 4 أمتار في العرض، أي 24 مترًا مربعًا. في ذلك الوقت، كانت المطابخ والمناطق الصحية (الدش، المراحيض، الغسيل) مبنية من الخرسانة. بسبب نقص المساحة داخل الخيام، كان الناس يقضون الكثير من وقتهم اليومي في الشوارع، حيث كانت الخيام تُستخدم للأكل، كغرفة نوم، وكمخزن. بعد بضعة أشهر، بدأ اللاجئون بتعديل خيامهم بأنفسهم، إضافة خشب-

واحد من هذه الخيام - تقريبًا 6م طويلاً و 4م عريضاً، 24 م². في ذلك الوقت، كانت المطابخ والمناطق الصحية (الدش، المراحيض، الغسيل) مبنية من الخرسانة. بسبب نقص المساحة داخل الخيام، كان الناس يقضون الكثير من وقتهم اليومي في الشوارع؛ كانت الخيام تُستخدم للأكل، كغرفة نوم وكمخزن. بعد بضعة أشهر، بدأ اللاجئون بتعديل خيامهم بأنفسهم، إضافة خشب-

en structure, used as a store room, with walls and roof in corrugated iron (*zinco*) (Fig. 2, n°2). In March 2013, Faysal acquired a second tent that he connected to the first (Fig. 2, n°3) and doubled the surface of

its housing. One served as a bedroom, the other as a kitchen and bathroom. The corrugated iron construction was transformed into a small informal shop, next the tents, where Faysal started selling second



استبيان للخطط المتلاحقة لمنزل فيصل بين عامي 2012 و2017 (ت. فورنييه وب. بيريو - فورنييه, 2017).
2. Measured survey of the successive plans of Faysal's house between 2012 and 2017
(T. Fournet and P. Piraud-Fournet, 2017).

المنزل. في عام 2013، حصل فيصل على خيمة ثانية التي ارتبطت بالخيمة الأولى، مما مضى مساحة السكن. تم تحويل الخيمة الأولى إلى غرفة نوم، والخيمة الثانية إلى مطبخ وحمام. تم تحويل البناء من الحديد المجعد إلى متجر صغير، بجانب الخيام، حيث بدأ فيصل ببيع

المنتجات المستعملة. في عام 2013، حصل فيصل على خيمة ثانية التي ارتبطت بالخيمة الأولى، مما مضى مساحة السكن. تم تحويل الخيمة الأولى إلى غرفة نوم، والخيمة الثانية إلى مطبخ وحمام. تم تحويل البناء من الحديد المجعد إلى متجر صغير، بجانب الخيام، حيث بدأ فيصل ببيع

hand clothes. A year later, Faysal received from the camp administration a prefabricated housing unit, called *caravan* (Fig. 2, n°4) used as a bedroom and *madhafeh*. He then began to reorganize his housing unit, building in wood and *zinco* around his *caravan* a kitchen and a bathroom, with a private courtyard in the centre, surrounded by a wall in *zinco*, while keeping his economic activity. According to a traditional model in the Middle East, the entrance is through the courtyard, establishing a clear distinction between the public space of the camp, and the private space of the house. During the winter 2013, another group of families from Bosra gathered tents around a private courtyard. The main entrance porch way, opening into the small courtyard, stands as a limit between private and public space where the families can gather, and is used by a safe playing area for the kids.

In September 2014, Faysal's house had undergone significant changes, linked to the settlement of his sister next to him (Fig. 2, n°5). Beginning 2015, he managed to buy a second caravan enlarging his house up to 80 m² (Fig. 2, n°6). One *caravan* was used as a *madhafeh* (or an accommodation for members of his family in need of assistance) and the other as a bedroom. The courtyard was enlarged, as well as his shop, always on the eastern street. The house was equipped with an individual water tank outside, on the street side. Tents were reused to cover the courtyard, protecting it from the sun or rain (Fig. 2, n°7).

But a year later, his impoverishment forced him to sell one of his caravans and to close and dismantle his shop. The total surface of his plot reached almost 130 m², but his family by then had only one room. He still had a small kitchen, a small bathroom and a small garden where he grew vegetable (Fig. 2, n°8). Six months later, just before winter, he removed the tents to cover a part of the courtyard with a wooden structure covered by corrugated iron (Fig. 2, n°9). Between December 2016 and the resettlement of the family to France in May 2017, Faysal was able to work for a Japanese humanitarian organization and earn money. He received from the UNHCR a second caravan for which he waited over a year. (Fig. 2, n°10). The former location of the shop became a closed courtyard serving as a store room. The northern caravan was used as a *madhafeh* and bedroom for Faysal and his wife, the southern caravan as a bedroom for the kids.

Despite a context where humanitarian assistance impose its rules and legal constraints are strict, refugees like Faysal transform their housing according to two main parameters: (1) to adapt to their day to day changing economic situation, (2) to recreate a private and personalized space, sometimes using traditional patterns, sometimes using new patterns, in a context where legal constraints are extremely strict. The many transformations and the constant evolution of housing, highlighted by the surveys, reflect the vulnerability of the refugees despite the humanitarian assistance they receive. It also reflects the agency of refugees who use, transform and adapt humanitarian assistance to recreate spaces better adapted to their social life and to protect the privacy of the family.

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