



# Refugees and the Urban Fabric: Palestinian and Syrian Settlement Patterns in Jordan

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# Refugees and the Urban Fabric

## Palestinian and Syrian Settlement Patterns in Jordan

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*Kamel Dorai*

### Introduction

The urban geography of Jordan has been profoundly transformed by the long-term settlement of forced migrants on its soil. Whole neighbourhoods in Amman have built up around the Palestinian refugee camps that are now an integral part of the Jordanian capital. The Palestinian experience largely determines the way that Jordanian authorities construct and implement policies related to the arrival of new refugee groups. Local authorities fear a repeat of the situation they have experienced with the Palestinians, which in the Syrian case could result in the permanent settlement of a large number of Syrian refugees in the kingdom, which would bring along with it potential political and security troubles. In 2012, Jordan faced a mass arrival of Syrian refugees, and the Jordanian authorities decided to open camps close to its border with Syria. The decision to open refugee camps was partly related to the fact that Jordanian authorities wanted to give visibility to the Syrian refugee crisis and to attract funding from the international community (Ali 2021). Nevertheless, this camp policy concerned only a limited proportion of the Syrian refugees. As 91 per cent of Jordanians live in urban areas (World Bank n.d.), most of the refugees also settle in the main cities of the kingdom. For example, the Azraq camp was opened in April 2013 to accommodate up to 130,000 people, when the number of refugees arriving

**Table 8.1.** Growth of Syrian refugees in Jordan (2013–21) and the percentage living outside camps.

Date	Urban/Rural	In camps	% outside camps
13/03/2013	130,502	158,766	45.2
31/12/2013	448,558	127,796	87.9
04/01/2015	523,001	100,337	83.9
19/01/2016	519,653	115,671	81.8
05/01/2017	514,251	141,148	78.5
02/01/2018	516,072	139,552	78.7
13/01/2019	545,542	126,009	81.3
05/01/2020	531,432	123,260	81.2
31/08/2021	540,815	129,822	80.6

Source: UNHCR 2023.

in Jordan was very high. Today the camp is mostly empty. According to the UNHCR, in August 2021 only 43,000 refugees lived in the camp. The majority of Syrian refugees, therefore, settle in urban areas whenever they have the opportunity, where employment opportunities are better and it is easier to resume a ‘normal’ life. Out of a total of 670,000 registered Syrian refugees, fewer than 130,000 are camp dwellers, meaning that more than 80 per cent of the registered Syrian refugees are settled outside camps (Table 8.1) (UNHCR 2023). While Jordan is facing economic difficulties in an unstable regional environment, assessing the specific effects of the Syrian presence is difficult. Nonetheless, the chapter points towards a few significant conclusions.

I will first present an overall picture of settlement patterns of refugee groups in urban areas. Second, I will discuss some key outcomes of this process. Third, based on this analysis, the chapter will contribute to going beyond the overly simplistic dichotomy between urban refugees and camp dwellers in temporary settlements, exploring the role of refugees in the urban fabric at different scales. Since the 1970s, studies on refugee populations have produced a large number of categories to describe their movements and their modes of settlement, such as urban refugees, refugees in camps, self-settled refugees and so on (Black 1991; Kunz 1981; Rogge 1977; Zetter 2007). Since the end of the 1980s, a growing number of studies have focused on the issue of refugees in urban areas, with particular emphasis on the prob-

lems of protection and access to services, often in comparison with the situation in refugee camps (Agier 2002; Al-Qutub 1989; Jacobsen 2004; Malkki 1995). Most of the refugees have experienced settlement in different spaces (camps, cities, temporary tent settlements) throughout their exile in Jordan. These different settlement spaces are not disconnected; several forms of complementarity exist and links are developed between refugees and host communities. The role of asylum regulation towards Syrian refugees in Jordan and its evolution over time are also central to understanding the current geography of asylum in northern Jordan. Based on fieldwork between 2014 and 2017, this chapter will explore the different aspects of settlement patterns in Jordan.

## **Refugees' Settlement and Urban Research: From Camps to the Urban Fabric**

The modes of settlement of refugee populations in cities are increasingly treated as such; recent studies have focused on them in the Middle East (Al-Sharmani 2003; Grabska 2006; Le Houérou 2007), in Africa (Pérouse de Montclos 2001; Jacobsen 2004) and in Asia (Beaujard 2008; Connór 1989). Despite the diversity of the situations observed, these studies show that refugee movements are part of their reception areas, and that the end of conflicts or violence does not systematically lead to the return of the entire population. The modes of settlement therefore tend to be long-lasting and deeply modify large parts of cities in the Global South. The different situations analysed in the literature, whether in Cairo, Khartoum, Monrovia, New Delhi or Peshawar, all point to the importance of forced migration in urban development and its articulation with other forms of migration, such as rural exodus.

Refugee settlement in urban areas is an old phenomenon that began in the contemporary Middle East in the second half of the nineteenth century with the settlement of the Circassian Muslims and Jewish groups, and later on the Armenians (Chatty and Finlayson 2010). Since 2000, it has become a growing field of research in the social sciences (Fábos and Kibreab 2007). This increased interest is partly due to the UNHCR's implementation of a new settlement policy. The UNHCR first issued a document in 1997 that set up a new approach to refugees' settlement, taking into account the necessity of developing assistance to and protection for urban refugees. Due to criticisms regarding the UNHCR approach and following the mass Iraqi refugee displacement across the Middle East after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the UNHCR in September 2009 adopted a new urban refugee policy (UNHCR 2012). It aimed at providing urban refugees with

similar protection and assistance as those living in camps receive. The experience with Iraqi refugees in the Middle East was partly used as a model for the development of UNHCR strategy-setting priorities: registration of refugees, protection, assistance, access to services and development of durable solutions (Crisp 2017). Syrian refugees in Jordan today benefit from that experience. More recently, a partial shift occurred in UNHCR policy, taking the 2009 urban refugee policy as a model and extending some of its principal objectives in refugee camps, as stated in a 2014 document issued by the UNHCR (2014: xx).

The Policy on Alternatives to Camps refocuses attention on refugees living in camps and extends the principal objectives of the urban refugee policy to all operational contexts. The urban refugee policy noted that it is usually taken for granted that camp-based refugees will receive indefinite assistance if they are unable to engage in agriculture or other economic activities. The policy on alternatives to camps challenges this assumption and calls for UNHCR to work decisively toward the removal of obstacles to the exercise of rights and achieving self-reliance, with a view to making what UNHCR historically called 'care and maintenance' programmes increasingly rare exceptions.

The camp should no longer be considered a temporary space where refugees only receive assistance, but can be considered a form of urban space where refugees develop self-reliance and recreate their social world in exile (Marx 1990). One example in Zaatari camp is the distribution to refugees of visa cards credited with a monthly amount and the opening of a supermarket in the camp, where refugees can choose and buy products instead of only receiving food assistance in boxes. These practices had first been developed in the urban context and then were transferred in the camps.

The classical distinction between *refugee camp dwellers* and *urban refugees* is mainly an operational one produced by international organizations. In protracted situations, refugee camps, conceived as temporary structures, tend to develop into makeshift cities. This categorization has to be differentiated from the evolution of refugee camps and from the practices developed by the refugees themselves. The ways that refugees transform their environment, as well as the constraints they face, are crucial to analysing the urbanization process of camps. In the analysis of refugees' settlement in the Middle East, there is a need to go beyond the distinction between camp and city, and to develop a broader reflection on the urban fabric generated by forced migration; as Michel Agier (2016: 463) wrote, 'camps anticipate new urban environments'. From temporary settlement spaces, camps have become real neighbourhoods integrated into the working-class outskirts of the cities that host them (Dorai 2010). Be it in urban spaces or in urbanized refugee camps, refugee groups contribute to the urban fabric, and have acquired

by their practices a 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1967). Lefebvre's conception of the 'right to the city' is that the dwellers retain the ability to produce their spaces without conforming to the dominant modes of spatial production, to participate in reshaping the existing norms and forces in which space is being produced within the capitalist order, rather than being themselves engulfed in its modes. In this sense, refugees settling for the long term in their host countries participate in the production of urban spaces and are actors of this production, sometimes in ways that conflict with state policies and urban regulation. They develop a form of appropriation through access, occupation and use of urban spaces. They produce spaces that meet their needs as urban dwellers. Dwelling can then be defined as a set of practices that an individual associates with places (Lussault 2003). This means that by dwelling, refugees contribute to the production of urban spaces.

Armenian refugee camps, like the Sandjak camp in Bourj Hammoud in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, and Palestinians camps have today been in existence for several decades. Today, these camps differ little from their immediate urban environment, and the morphology of urban camps in the Near East is very far from the classic image of the refugee camp, as a result of their long-term settlement. 'To what extent can practices that were designed for the purposes of survival and the extension of often highly precarious forms of life offer a touchstone for other alternative imaginings of cityness?' (Vasudevan 2015: 339). Refugee camps, over time, can thus be considered a type of urban structure that combines different temporalities: a temporary perception of exile, related to the precarious legal status of refugees in their host countries and the temporary character of refugee camps, and a durable *de facto* settlement in protracted conflict that can be analysed as 'an alternative urban life' (*ibid.*: 342).

## Refugee Crisis, a Driver of Urban Change in Jordan

Refugees' settlement has been one of the main drivers of urban development in Jordan since the emergence of the Hashemite kingdom. Amman and its suburbs grew in different stages with the arrival of migrants who settled in the capital, helping redefine the socio-economic structure of the city and its geographical morphology. From the Circassian communities, considered to be the first inhabitants of Amman, to the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees and the current Syrian groups, Amman has been deeply transformed. But this phenomenon is not limited to the Jordanian capital: other cities have gone through a profound urban change due to the settlement of refugee groups. Mafraq in the north and Azraq in the north-east have faced dramatic urban change since the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011.

## Amman, a City Growth Driven by Asylum and Migration

Migrants and refugees' settlement process in contemporary Jordan is central to understanding the urban growth of the main cities of the Hashemite Kingdom, and more specifically Amman (Ababsa 2011). Amman was settled by several waves of Circassian migrants who created different neighbourhoods beginning in 1878. Later on, they contributed to the development of other cities in different parts of Jordan such as Jerash, Naour, Sweileh and Ru-saifeh. If their migration was organized by the Ottoman immigration commission, 'Ottoman documents show that even though the Commission was in place and the policy for the settlement of Circassians in Bilâd ash-shâm might have been clear, the actual process of settlement was often disorganized' (Shami 1996: 309). According to Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky (2017), Amman was first considered a Circassian refugee settlement by Ottoman authorities in the late 1800s, before it was turned into a district centre in 1914 and thereafter considered to be an urban space.

The settlement of Palestinian refugees in 1948 and 1967 contributed further to the urban development of Amman. In 1918, Amman's population was less than 5,000 inhabitants, with an urban area less than half a square kilometre. When in 1921 Amman became the capital of Transjordan, its population was estimated at 10,500. In the early 1940s, before the arrival of Palestinian refugees, the population was around 45,000, and the city extended over an area of some 2.5 square kilometres by 1947. In the early 1950s, Amman's population more than doubled and reached around 100,000 inhabitants (Alnsour 2016). Since their arrival in 1948, refugee camps have deeply transformed eastern neighbourhoods and gradually became part of the city (Hanania 2014). Middle- and upper-class Palestinians also settled in more privileged areas.

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, nearly 200,000 Palestinians left Kuwait because they were opposed to the Iraqi occupation and to escape the conflict. Another 20,000 Palestinians were expelled by the Kuwaiti authorities following the conflict in 1991 (Radi 1994). The involuntary return of Palestinians from Kuwait to Jordan had a significant impact on Jordanian society, given the numerical scale of the phenomenon (Van Hear 1995). That event contributed to the transformation of entire neighbourhoods of west Amman. Most of the returnees were well off and rented or bought apartments and villas in the most privileged locations of Jabal Amman.

More recently, refugee groups have also settled in Jordan. From the 1990s, and then after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees arrived in Jordan, and some of them settled in Amman (Chatelard et al. 2009). Jordanian authorities decided not to open refugee camps in order to avoid the emergence of new pockets of poverty and to limit the possibility of political organization on its territory. These

Iraqis were thus all labelled ‘urban refugees’ (Chatelard and Dorai 2009). A large proportion of the Iraqis who arrived after 2003 had an urban background and belonged to the middle class. They settled in western Amman, and opened many shops, restaurants and travel agencies. Others, from less privileged backgrounds, settled in the eastern popular suburbs of Amman, and faced difficulties accessing the labour market (Twigt 2016).

The failure to resolve the Palestinian question, resulting in the continued presence of the camps since their creation in the early 1950s, along with the urban settlement of more recent refugee groups, strongly influences the current processing of new refugee flows both regionally and within Jordan. The reluctance of authorities in host states to open refugee camps is partly due to their fear that the refugees will settle on their land for the long term, as has been the case with Palestinian refugees.

Syrian refugees who settle in urban areas differ from those settled in refugee camps mainly in terms of their greater socio-economic diversity. Syrians living in refugee camps generally originate from disadvantaged social backgrounds and have few previous connections with Jordan. They do not have social capital to gain the support of Jordanian citizens who could become their *kafil* (an Arabic term for sponsor). They also come from rural areas and therefore often have more difficulty settling in urban spaces. Many refugees from Zaatari camp tried to live in an urban setting, but many were forced to return to the camp because they could not support themselves and their families. Despite the UNHCR’s implementation of an assistance policy in urban areas, it is easier to access aid in the camps. In the Zaatari refugee camp, we find mainly Syrians from southern Syria and more particularly from the Daraa region.

Several political innovations have been tested in Jordan in cooperation with foreign humanitarian organizations in the field of access to housing for Syrian refugees outside the camps. Myriam Ababsa (2020: 32) notes that

since 2011 the Norwegian Refugee Council has been leading innovative operations in the field of housing for refugees in urban areas, in Lebanon and Jordan. Originally designed as an aid for the construction of new housing (second floor, small houses, additional rooms) amounting to 3,900 JD in exchange for free accommodation for Syrian refugees for a period of 12 to 18 months (966 apartments created in 2013–2015), the program evolved in 2016 to consist of the renovation of housing already rented by Syrians, in order not to move them from district to district.

More generally, as noted in this report, the construction sector in Jordan has benefited from the massive influx of refugees into the country. The policy discussed by Ababsa above was implemented to develop alternatives to camps and to promote better integration of Syrian refugees into their host communities. Refugees’ settlement becomes part of a broader process of ur-

ban transformation. It aims to facilitate the access, both of poor Jordanians and refugees, to affordable housing in the long term.

## **Urbanization, State Control and New Urban Practices**

Refugees play a relatively important role in urban development, particularly in informal settlements. They also develop specific relationships with host societies, based on the supposedly temporary nature of their settlement. The massive influx of forced migrants into certain areas (such as towns and villages in northern Jordan) brings about significant changes for the host societies at the local level. According to Ababsa (2019: 74), ‘compared to the local population, Syrian refugees represent 37.8% of the population in the governorate of Mafraq (207,923 out of 549,948 individuals according to the 2015 census), and 19.3% of that of Irbid governorate (343,207 out of 1.77 million inhabitants)’. These refugees are particularly located in urban areas of the northern governorates. For example, Mafraq, the city close to where Zaatari camp is located, has been deeply transformed by the nearby population of Syrian refugees. It is estimated that between eighty and a hundred thousand Syrians live in Mafraq, and that constitutes around half of the city’s total population (Wagner 2018). Other cities such as Ramtha, close to the Syrian border, or Irbid have also witnessed important influxes of Syrians. In 2014, following this mass arrival and due to the development of informal tent camps, control measures for refugees in urban areas were implemented. Jordanian authorities dismantled 125 informal tent camps set up in the Jordan Valley, in the Mafraq governorate and in the suburbs of Amman (Ababsa 2015).

Despite the effects of the Jordanian authorities’ control, the settlement of Syrian refugees has transformed entire neighbourhoods, mostly in relation to the development of commercial activities. The practices developed by Syrian refugees in urban spaces have deeply changed cities. In this sense, the example of Mafraq is significant. This small town in northern Jordan has long been a stopover town on the road linking Amman to Syria. Since the arrival of large numbers of Syrians, the city centre has undergone significant commercial development, becoming a commercial centre in connection with the Zaatari camp located a few kilometres away (Sqour et al. 2016). Zaatari camp depends on the city of Mafraq and neighbouring villages to ensure the supply of its internal market with various products (food, building materials, etc.). Most of the consumer goods found in the camp are brought in by Jordanian traders. Most of the time these goods are brought into the camp informally. The camp, and its seventy-five thousand inhabitants, have therefore strongly contributed to the development of trade in connection with Mafraq. The presence of many international aid organiza-

tions has also contributed to modifying the urban landscape. Moreover, it is the very practices of the city that have been transformed. Syrians are used to utilizing public spaces in groups at different times of the day, which has contributed to making the city's streets real spaces for meeting and socializing. We are witnessing a transformation of the city quite similar to those seen in the Zaatari camp with the emergence of shopping streets, which play an economic role but also a role in the reconfiguration of modes of sociability in exile. These urban practices tend to make the presence of refugees in the city visible, although it should be noted that certain categories of refugees, such as young men without a work permit, often adopt strategies of being invisible in the public space because they risk deportation to one of the Jordanian refugee camps or to Syria (Wagner 2017).

Héloïse Peaucelle (2020) highlights quite similar phenomena in the transformation of downtown Irbid. That city has undergone significant changes in connection with the arrival of the Syrians, whether in the old city centre, in the train station area or in the university area. Commercial spaces have developed with the settlement of the Syrians in the city. Irbid has seen its urban development accelerate. The city's practices have also evolved, giving Syrians significant visibility in the city's souk and around University Street. The city is also witnessing real estate investments that are contributing to the transformation of the urban landscape. The purchasing of apartments in Irbid, despite having increased sharply after 2011, is nevertheless part of older logics of commercial practices between Syria and the north of Jordan (Lagarde and Doraï 2017). The urban agglomeration has also expanded further east in the direction of the city of Ramtha with the installation in the industrial zone of factories relocated from Syria by Syrian entrepreneurs. The best known is the Al Durra food factory. 'In January 2020, the factory in the Ramtha Industrial Zone employed 500 workers, including 150 Syrians, and planned to expand its activity' (Peaucelle 2020).

The agglomeration of Amman, which hosts 28 per cent of the Syrian refugees living outside the camps (Al-Tal and Ghanem 2019), has also undergone significant transformations in two distinct types of neighbourhoods. West Amman, and more particularly the neighbourhoods around the university, have hosted many refugees with an urban background from the educated middle and upper classes, which corresponds to the social background of the Jordanian inhabitants of this area. Commercial activities have also developed there, as was the case in nearby locations with Iraqi refugees who arrived a few years earlier. It should also be noted that Syrian refugees of Circassian and Chechen origins have established connections through cultural and educational associations with corresponding Jordanian ethnic groups. The spatial distribution of refugees in the city has indeed most often been based on social class belonging, which largely determines the financial capacities of the refugees. Syrian refugees are therefore found

in the working-class neighbourhoods east of the capital, but also in the more distant outskirts where rents are lowest, such as Palestinian refugee camps and neighbourhoods where the state has developed social housing for the poorest Jordanians. In neighbourhoods where informal urbanization is present, floors built with apparent concrete breezeblock have been added above dwellings to be rented out to Syrians. The Syrian presence has therefore contributed to modifying the urban landscape and densifying the city.

The settlement of refugees sparks a number of debates regarding the pressure placed on the rental market, the overall rise in prices, the loss of safety in certain areas, labour market competition and so on. In the case of Jordan, the region has not escaped a more global phenomenon that typically stigmatizes the large-scale influx of refugees (Hyndman 2000). In some border areas, such as the north-west of Jordan, the effects of the settlement of a very large number of refugees have in fact had important consequences for local populations, even if it is the poorest and most marginalized populations that are paying the price of increased pressure on the rental market. In some neighbourhoods, rents have risen significantly and are difficult to afford for the poorest households, while some services such as schools and medical care have also been affected. According to the UNHCR (2020), 133,000 Syrian children were enrolled in public schools in Jordan in 2020. In municipalities with a high number of Syrians, the schools have had to transition to a system in which classes are held in two shifts. Jordanian pupils usually attend school in the morning and Syrian refugee children in the afternoon.

## **Economic Integration of Syrian Urban Refugees**

Urban settlement of Syrian refugees has contributed to their economic integration both in formal and informal markets. Following the Jordan Compact in 2016, the Jordanian government has developed a policy to promote the employment of Syrians in Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs). 'While innovative, the Compact will not upset the status quo by creating Syrian competition with Trans-Jordanians for employment' (Ali 2021: 189). The work permits that are delivered concern segments of the labour market where Jordanians are not represented and that are already occupied by migrant workers such as Egyptians. At the beginning of the implementation of the programme, Jordan announced a three-month suspension of legal proceedings against refugees working without a permit in order to give their employers time to regularize their situation. Of a total of two hundred thousand expected work permits, only 38,756 were issued during 2020, quasi-exclusively for male workers (93.2 per cent). Nearly half of them were in the agriculture sector (46.1 per cent), 18.9 per cent were in the construction sector and 10.4 per cent in manufacturing (Ministry of Labour 2020). This rel-

atively low number of work permits can be explained both by the difficult economic situation in Jordan and the importance of the informal sector. Jordan's labour market is segmented according to national affiliation. Migrants are generally relegated to manual and low-skilled jobs in the domestic work, construction, agriculture and hospitality sectors that Jordanians are reluctant to do. The labour market has only been opened in limited economic sectors. Jordanian legislation generally only authorizes the employment of foreigners on the condition that it compensates for a lack of qualifications or human resources within the Jordanian labour force, in certain sectors and according to pre-established quotas (al Husseini 2021).

This has led to increased competition in certain sectors of the labour market (mostly daily workers employed in the construction sector or agriculture). Unemployment rates among Jordanians, for example, rose significantly between 2011 and 2014 – the period during which most of the refugees arrived in Jordan – increasing from 14 per cent to 22 per cent, with young men particularly affected (Stave and Hillesund 2015). However, it is difficult to determine what part the refugees' presence has played in this increase (IRC 2016). It should also be noted that many of the jobs in question were taken by other migrant groups such as Egyptians, who were affected by the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the presence of refugees has had positive effects for the host country thanks to investments made by Syrian entrepreneurs who have relocated part of their activities to the industrial areas of Jordan. International aid, while it does not cover the full costs of the refugee presence, also helps to develop certain sectors of activity (such as NGOs) and stimulates demand for consumer goods and equipment.

At a local scale, some economic activities have been developed by small entrepreneurs benefiting from the presence of qualified Syrian manpower. During fieldwork carried out with Myriam Ababsa, I analysed the effects of the settlement of Syrian refugees in Sahab, an industrial city on the outskirts of Amman. The municipal team there tried to develop an active approach to the integration of Syrians after 2011, for example by teaching Jordanian and Syrian children in the same classes at school, while in other cities refugee children are taught in the afternoon without the Jordanian students. Syrian refugee entrepreneurs who fled from the city of Hama in 1982 settled in Sahab and developed industrial activities there. In 2011, we witnessed a similar phenomenon and various types of activities developed at the initiative of Syrian entrepreneurs. The presence of skilled Syrian workers has also contributed to the development of economic activities through investments by Jordanians who seize new opportunities. For example, we visited a textile factory, which combined weaving and clothmaking. A Jordanian investor, who had a store in downtown Amman, developed his business with the presence of skilled Syrian garment workers from Aleppo. He set up a workshop in the basement of a building, with the families of the workers

living upstairs. This activity remains informal, the workers do not have work permits and the factory is not registered. The costs of regularization are too high. This activity is still tolerated by local authorities because it helps to provide employment for refugees and to generate profits for the entrepreneur. In addition, skilled Syrian workers trained Jordanians in weaving and dressmaking. We have here the combination of economic activity and housing in the same space. This example shows the potential complementarities between host populations and refugees, and the benefits of settling the latter in urban spaces. Syrians often find employment in other sectors of activity, such as in the catering sector, in stonecutting or as daily workers in the construction sector.

But the mass arrival of Syrian refugees in the labour market has also exacerbated competition with Syrian workers who were working in Jordan before 2011. Their situation has also seriously deteriorated. Some used to have the status of migrant workers, some of them with recognized professional qualifications, and following 2011 became refugees in competition with an increasing number of their co-nationals. They have had to face a significant increase in the cost of living (the cost of renting their accommodation), which has often been accompanied by a drop in their wages. A young Syrian I met in the Zaatari camp in November 2014 had become a refugee in 2011 even though he had been settled for several years in Irbid, Jordan. He was working as a carpenter for a Jordanian employer and earned 400 dinars a month. He was renting an apartment in Irbid for 100 dinars a month. The arrival of a high number of refugees from 2012 resulted in increased competition in the labour market. In some regions, the presence of a workforce seeking employment, with no other resources to fall back on, has driven down wages. The young Syrian's employer offered to give him permanent work in exchange for a cut in wages. At the same time, his rent rose sharply. No longer able to cope with the rising cost of living combined with a considerable loss of income, he decided to settle in the Zaatari refugee camp where the accommodation was free and where he received humanitarian aid. Although this is merely an example, it illustrates that the impact of the Syrian crisis have been felt among migrant populations already present in Jordan.

The Jordan Compact enabled the Syrian refugees to access the official labour market and their economic integration, while limiting their social integration by keeping in place their temporary residency status. Syrian refugees can be deported to one of the refugee camps, and especially Azraq camp, by Jordanian authorities, without any possibility to get out of the camp, as they fear being sent back to Syria (Reporters without Borders 2021). Refugee camps can turn into *de facto* detention camps for Syrian refugees. The security approach developed by the Jordanian authorities therefore involves an urban dimension in the reception of Syrian refugees who

can facilitate their own economic integration while keeping refugee camps open to isolate certain categories of refugees from Jordanian society.

## **The Camp and the City: The Urbanization Process of Syrian Camps in Jordan**

The situation concerning Syrian refugees since 2011 has partly reoriented Jordanian settlement policy (Turner 2015). Unlike Lebanon, which takes in a higher number of refugees, Jordan has opened refugee camps in the north of the country in an effort to channel incoming flows.<sup>1</sup> While the three main Syrian refugee camps in Jordan contain only 20 per cent of the total number of Syrians, most of the refugees have passed through transit camps on the border with Syria. These camps were established along with the gradual closure of the western border between Syria and Jordan. They enable the Jordanian authorities to carry out security checks before allowing the refugees to enter their territory. Waiting times in these camps vary according to refugee profiles. If accepted, the refugees are then sent to one of the three settlements. If they have a Jordanian *kafil* they can settle elsewhere in the territory.

If most of the refugees in the region settle in cities – and are de facto urban refugees – refugee camps gradually also become part of the city. While most of the Palestinian or Armenian camps are now part of the city that hosts them, more recent camps are also becoming urbanized. As Diana Martin (2015: 13) notes concerning Beirut, ‘The explosion of informal settlements made villages around the capital become the natural extension of its centre while refugee camps, not isolated any longer, began touching the city. As informal settlement mushroomed, the “misery belt” became the threshold where the camp and the city met. So while biopolitical imaginations may depict the camp as an isolated space, well demarcated and impermeable, this does not reflect the reality on the ground.’

Camps and cities can no longer be considered as two separate and distinct entities. Jordanian authorities, in collaboration with international actors, decided to improve the socio-economic and housing situation in the camps by integrating them into the urban planning of the capital. Indeed, refugee camps tend to become similar to poor neighbourhoods (Destremau 1996; Hart 2000). The difference between Palestinian refugee camps and poor areas is becoming blurred. Jabal Natheef is for example not an official UNRWA camp, despite mostly inhabited by Palestinians. The refugees live in a camplike situation while being integrated de jure into the city (Arini 2014). For example, Jabal Hussein, a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, has been integrated into the urban planning strategy developed by the municipality (Oesch 2014). This policy is partly linked to the protracted situa-

tion of the Palestinian camps in Jordan, but is also being used as a strategy to integrate Palestinian refugees who are citizens of the kingdom.

The Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, like Zaatari, have undergone rapid and in-depth changes in their structure. In a certain sense they have developed a form of urban life, similar to what Palestinian camps have experienced. Baqa'a camp, which is one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, was built in a remote area and has developed since then into an urban centre (Alnsour and Meaton 2014).

Zaatari camp, opened in July 2012 in northern Jordan, a few kilometres from the city of Mafrqa, is the most telling example. Upon its creation, this camp had all the characteristics of a humanitarian space created to respond to the massive arrival of Syrian refugees on Jordanian territory. Tents are set up along an orthogonal plan to accommodate families who settle there (Dorai and Piraud-Fournet 2018). Humanitarian organizations are developing their facilities there to assist the refugees (medical clinics, schools, food distribution centres, etc.). But very quickly, the Syrian refugees reorganized their living space.

While the camp is partially disconnected from its Jordanian socio-economic environment, the morphology of this space is changing. The lack of connection with its close geographical environment pushes the Syrians to develop, with their own resources and limited contributions from outside, their own economy. To ensure their livelihoods, the Syrians themselves develop commercial activities inside the camp (Dalal 2015). At the entrance to the camp, a shopping street has developed. Officially named Souk Street, it is called 'Champs-Élysées' by the inhabitants. The homes have all been transformed into stalls selling basic products (groceries, bakery goods, fruit and vegetables, etc.), into telecommunications or handiwork stores, but also into small restaurants, hairdressers, jewellery stores, clothing stores and so on. This street has therefore become, beyond a source of income activity, a space of sociability where refugees meet and walk around as in a commercial area of a city. This shows that Syrian society is rebuilding itself as best it can in exile; even shops renting wedding dresses have appeared. As the refugees' exile develops into a long-term one, services are being developed in the camp to adapt to their needs. There are also street vendors who offer coffee, tea or sandwiches. This commercial street has extended into another perpendicular street. Throughout the camp, small stalls have been set up in front of homes to sell food products.

This myriad of very small businesses generates meagre income that complements the aid provided by international organizations and provides an activity for refugees deprived of employment. As the camp spreads over a large area, districts distinct from each other are developing. At the beginning they were numbered sections following the spatial extension of the camp at the rate of the new arrivals. Step by step, refugees reorganized and gathered in groups in order to recreate forms of neighbourhood and prox-

imity similar to those they experienced in Syria before their exile. These forms of gathering make it possible to recreate, to a certain extent, a fragment of Syrian society in exile. Livelihoods are therefore recreated around family members who were able to find refuge in the camp and relatives from the same neighbourhoods or villages in Syria. Most often, informal associations are emerging, and traditional forms of music, for example, are played by small groups of refugees. The camp therefore becomes a space of life and sociability; this is a consequence of the forced exile and the absence of alternative solutions.

In this sense, the exile of the Syrians today can be considered similar to that of the Palestinians several decades earlier. The camp is therefore a unique space that is developing. On the one hand, the camp is perceived as a space of confinement and waiting, where precariousness reigns and where dependence is strong vis-à-vis international aid. The refugee status is fully felt by the inhabitants, for the most part forced into inactivity. The rules governing construction are very restrictive, and the Syrians cannot build permanent housing in the camps. They live in prefabricated homes that they can rearrange. The housing units are undergoing rapid degradation due to the rather difficult climatic conditions in northern Jordan. The camp is therefore the very symbol of the tension in which the refugees are caught, between the precariousness of material conditions and confinement on the one hand, and the desire to rebuild an *urban* life in exile on the other.

This space thus becomes a real centrality, the embryo of urban life, where Syrians develop and recreate social life. We are therefore witnessing a reconfiguration of the camp space, conceived by humanitarian organizations as an intervention space. It is transformed by its inhabitants who try to recreate there a space of sociability in exile. If most often the camps are in the city, as is the case with the Shatila camps in Beirut or the Wahdat camps in Amman, the city also emerges in the camp. By becoming urbanized, however, the camp does not disappear. The urbanization process is based on the recreation of a social space by the refugees and allows the emergence of spatial practices that contribute to the urban fabric. However, the camp retains certain specificities, as a symbol of the forced exile of refugees and a segregated space with specific regulations imposed by host states and international organizations.

## Conclusion

Amman is often depicted by observers as not being a city. Indeed, the Jordanian capital is totally different from old Middle Eastern cities such as Aleppo, Damascus or Tripoli. This might be related to the fact that contemporary Amman is rather a young city, and that it has been largely built by refugees and migrants from different origins. Jordan has a long history of

refugee settlement. It has chosen at different periods of its history to open refugee camps or to settle refugees in urban areas. In both cases, the protracted nature of refugees' settlement has led to the development of urban spaces. Urban dynamics are tightly related to the arrival of forced migrants from the Middle East, Palestinians, Iraqis and Syrians. As Romola Sanyal (2012: 640) notes, 'The city is a contested concept that has been debated amongst scholars for a long time. Till now, there seems to be little consensus on what constitutes a city – which perhaps makes it suitable as a complex geography to compare with a camp. In particular, debates on urban poverty and informality are useful in thinking through the evolving socio-spatial relations in refugee spaces.'

This last decade, the decision by Jordanian authorities to implement urban renovation of informal neighbourhoods including certain refugee camps has contributed to the blurring of the distinction between camps and urban areas. Jordan has experienced in parallel two different forms of urbanization: urban growth (related to rural migration, natural growth, and migrants and refugees' settlement) and refugee camps' urbanization, contributing to redefining what a city is in these spaces.

Coming back to Lefebvre's definition of the right to the city, it is perhaps through the analysis of urban practices and the emergence of new sociabilities that new urban forms emerge, linking refugees, migrants and host communities. These are neighbourhoods where pilgrims, refugees and migrant workers mix, develop and inscribe parts of the cities in transnational circulation. Increasingly diverse populations mix, coexist and give rise to new urban identities marked by a cosmopolitanism 'from below'. The very identity of some neighbourhoods has been sharply transformed by the arrival of large numbers of migrants and refugees. These transformations do not occur without tensions, and the presence of foreign newcomers is seen by some as an intrusion into an area historically marked by a particular group. However, at the micro-local level, new forms of interaction and solidarity have emerged, based on neighbourhood relations, belonging to a common ethnic or religious group or economic complementarity. These interactions contribute to redefining the boundaries of groups, as Fredrik Barth (1969) defines them, such as citizens, foreigners, migrants and refugees in these new contexts of cohabitation. Michel Agier (2004) invites us to reflect on the consequences of humanitarian interventions on the resulting forms of categorization, and more particularly on the notion of citizenship of which refugees are deprived. Humanitarian governance generates new categories of analysis. Notions such as resilience or self-reliance (often used by international organizations and NGOs) contribute to blurring the limits between humanitarian assistance and development, tending to place refugees, and their specific treatment, in a kind of normality.

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## Notes

1. Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq had also opened camps along their borders with Syria. Across the region, less than one-fifth of refugees live in the camps.

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