

Integrative or segregative refugee hosting spaces, a matter of human rights

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Abstract: In the recent past, the number of people fleeing their countries due to armed conflicts has increased exponentially. When large arrivals occur, hosting countries are often not prepared and opt for potentially improvable solutions. The present monographic aims to expose the violation of human rights that takes place when adopting a segregative approach through two case studies: Azraq, a UN-led refugee camp in Jordan, and a self-settled informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.

Key words: refugees, human rights, camps, inclusion, cities.

Espais integradors o segregadors d'acollida de refugiats, una qüestió de drets humans

Resum: En els darrers anys, el nombre de persones que fugen dels seus països a causa dels conflictes armats ha augmentat exponencialment. Quan es produeixen arribades massives de refugiats, els països d'acolliment no solen estar preparats i opten per solucions potencialment millorables. El present article pretén exposar la vulneració dels drets humans que es produeix en adoptar un enfocament segregador a través de dos casos d'estudi: Azraq, un camp de refugiats dirigit per l'ONU a Jordània, i un assentament informal autogestionat a la vall de la Bekaa (Líban).

Paraules clau: refugiats, drets humans, camps, inclusió, ciutats.

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Introduction

When an emergency occurs and a significant number of people are forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere, the response from hosting communities is crucial. The integration of forced migrants in existing human communities is, in most cases, the best solution regarding their living conditions. In the abovementioned approach, livelihood opportunities as well as access to services can be better guaranteed. Urban environments are also associated with better physical health for refugees than camps (Crea, 2015). Nevertheless, this integration model is not always possible or wanted in the hosting countries. Consequently, encampment solutions emerge: ex-novo settlements which house refugees segregated from local populations. Even though this is not the most adequate solution, it is a hosting model adopted in many contexts worldwide, including in the Middle East, Africa, South-America and Europe.

Over one third of refugees worldwide are settled in locations that are physically separated from hosting communities, such as planned camps,¹ self-settled camps,² collective centers³ and retention camps⁴ (UNHCR 2015). These locations are spatially isolated from local communities by walls, entry and exit control or geographic remoteness. Furthermore, spatial isolation hampers refugees' interaction with locals and hinders access to livelihood opportunities and national public services and infrastructure. In particular, camps are meant to be a short-term solution of less than two years. Nevertheless, they tend to have lifespans of around 20 years, as most refugees live in protracted situations (UNHCR 2016). Besides, the people living in camps are those with less economical resources and greater vulnerability among the refugee populations (Alloush, 2017).

1 A refugee camp is a temporary settlement built in order to host refugees and planned and managed by the UNHCR, international agencies or NGOs.

2 A self-settled camp is a temporary settlement constructed and managed by the refugees themselves.

3 Collective centers are preexistent built structures that are used for refugee settlement on a temporary basis, mainly in urban contexts. Restriction on freedom of movement for refugees varies between closed, semi-closed, semi-open and open centers. Therefore, although collective centers are mostly integrated into the urban tissue, this does not imply freedom of movement for refugees, who might be detained within these structures.

4 Retention camps are public non-penitentiary establishments where foreign people who have been rejected from the national territory are retained for "preventive" and "cautionary" reasons.

This study focuses on two camp scenarios: Azraq, a UN-led refugee camp in Jordan, and a self-settled camp in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Both can be classified as segregative hosting spaces, since they are spatially isolated from other local communities. These two settlements have been chosen as examples to highlight the downfalls of segregative hosting spaces in two of the countries currently hosting the largest numbers of Syrian refugees. Due to their different political, social and geographical backgrounds, these two scenarios have developed very diverse social and spatial realities. How significant is the evolution of existing hosting policies for the camps' development and what are the consequences in terms of rights?

In the following section, we describe the hosting policies of each country, the governance system in each settlement, and their spatial and social consequences. During the fieldwork, 50 questionnaires in Jordan and 126 in Lebanon were carried out and analyzed. Informal interviews and a detailed study of the shelters and the urban distribution were also completed.

Lebanon and Jordan as hosting countries of Syrian refugees

In 2021, 85% of refugees were settled in low- or middle-income countries close to the conflict areas. These countries usually lack the preparation and resources to deal with a large influx of newcomers. Due to the Syrian war, Lebanon and Jordan are among the countries hosting the largest number of refugees relative to their national population (McAuliffe, 2021). Insufficient natural and economic resources, the immediacy of the needs arising from the emergency, and the difficulty of predicting the duration of infrastructures have made it very difficult to provide an appropriate and satisfactory response to the massive arrival of Syrian refugees (European University Institute 2019).

Although both countries have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention recognising the responsibility to grant temporary protection to refugees, they developed distinct asylum policies and settlement models. On the one hand, Jordan encouraged the creation of refugee camps, planned and managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). On the other, Lebanon will not contemplate the creation of refugee camps, thus proliferating informal settlements managed by refugees in a self-organized manner.

Azraq refugee camp

In 1998, the Jordan government and the UNHCR signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), where the country granted the main principles of international protection to asylum seekers and the international organization has the authority to manage the refugee camps in the country (UNHCR, 2017). Several experts point out that the camp's policies are a consequence of an intent to ease humanitarian aid, prove budget allocation to international sponsors, and have greater governmental control over refugees (Ababsa, 2015). Currently, the biggest Syrian refugee camps in Jordan are Zaatari, with 75,000 inhabitants, and Azraq, with 36,550 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2018; UNHCR, 2019).

Azraq camp is located in a desert area 20 km from the closest inhabited settlement (Azraq village, 9,000 inhabitants). The weather conditions during the year are very extreme: in winter temperatures drop to 7°C, while in summer they can reach 41°C.

The verticality shown in its social organization is also reflected in its spatial framework. Those who manage the camp—UNHCR and NGOs—are settled in a fenced area with high quality shelters (e.g., with AC) and isolated from the rest of the refugee housing areas. This becomes a physical representation of power within the camp, in addition reflecting the distance between refugees and the other stakeholders. Moreover, several barriers, fences and security controls prevent refugees from leaving Azraq. There is a high number of refugees applying to leave the camp, but just a few get permission. According to interviewed refugees, only those who can pay bribes to officials get permission to leave the camp.

The camp offers health centers, mosques, playing areas, community centers and police stations in every section of the camp. Moreover, in one of the sections and for all refugees it provides a school, a supermarket, a bread distribution point, a market and a cemetery.

The camp layout and the shelters have been designed by UNHCR, with almost no decision-making nor intervention from the refugees. An orthogonal and repetitive distribution of shelters has been designed to facilitate aid agencies' tasks within the camp. Indeed, on the one hand, it secures equal distribution of goods and services among refugees, while on the other, its wide avenues facilitate control, monitoring and security tasks over refugees.

The same logic follows the design of the refugee shelters. The T-shelter is a prefabricated metal shelter designed as a multipurpose space of 24 square meters,

without private toilets or showers. Worth mentioning is that the cost of the overall 10,479 T-shelters in the camp was approximately 28.4 million euros (UNHCR, 2015). These one-size-fits-all shelters are shared by 4 to 6 people and lack any sense of privacy for the inhabitants. According to a few refugees in the camp, no gardening is allowed due to the lack of groundwater, alienating them even more from the living space. In fact, only 35L of water per day per refugee is ensured, while the World Health Organization states that 50-100L of water is necessary to cover basic needs.

The toilets and showers provided, the so-called WASH units, are located at the ends of a double row of 6 shelters and separated by gender. This means that every WASH unit is shared by six shelters and some refugees have to walk in front of other housings to reach the toilet. Many refugees, especially women, stated in our interviews that during the dark hours they would not leave their shelter to defecate or urinate because of fear of sexual harassment. This atmosphere of mistrust can lead to psychological and physical problems due to urine and excrement contention.

The lack of agency of refugees in Azraq camp goes beyond the spatial domain and extends to the social sphere. For example, many refugees complained that they could not choose their shelter's location. The camp managing agencies placed newcomers following arrival order, and without considering their place of origin. Therefore, members of the same family or friends are often settled far from each other, jeopardizing the construction of a rich social capital.

Moreover, the nature of their current social meetings is far from that of the traditional Syrian practices. Based on our questionnaires, meetings are held in private places, in their own shelters. Traditionally, however, men would meet in open spaces, like main streets and venues, while women would meet in semi-private and private spaces. Since these semi-private locations do not exist in such a grid-like urban distribution, women only meet in private spaces.

Furthermore, daily activities such as water and bread collection imply long waiting times and crowded cues. In our interviews, several women expressed their feelings of insecurity in these spots and a tendency to avoid such duties due to fear of sexual harassment.

In conclusion, Azraq camp offers, mainly thanks to Saudi aid, a range of service provision hardly ever seen. However, it is isolated, it suffers from extreme temperatures, there is high mobility control and a lack of entitlement for refugees. Not surprisingly, Azraq camp is a place where few people would voluntarily live, and some refugees name it "the Guantanamo of the Jordanian desert".

Informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

In 2003, the Lebanese government signed a MoU with the UNHCR, providing for 12-month temporary permits for refugees until relocation to third countries takes place. The MoU however, does not guarantee basic rights, such as the right to health, the right to education or the right to work. Indeed, in order to work in Lebanon a Syrian refugee must be endorsed by a Lebanese (OCHA, 2016).

Moreover, the MoU does not authorize the UNHCR to create nor manage formal refugee camps in the country (Frotniersuwad, 2003). Therefore, non-urban refugees in Lebanon are settled in self-organized informal settlements, where the participation of national or international non-governmental organizations is limited to some infrastructure and services.

The Bekaa Valley is a mountainous area 10 km from the Syrian border that has welcomed approximately 360,000 people in 4,321 informal settlements. These settlements are placed on agricultural land sublet by the Shaweesh, the head of the settlement, from a Lebanese landlord. The Shaweesh is a Syrian economic migrant that had labour contacts in Lebanon prior to the war. When massive numbers of Syrian refugees arrived in the area, Shaweeshes became entitled to control over a piece of land through a rental contract and subsequently over its inhabitants (OCHA, 2018). These informal settlements lack provision of basic services such as education, health care services and sanitation.

The social structures are very hierarchical: the Shaweesh has the power to decide who can live in the settlement and how much it costs. He is also responsible for providing basic services, including water and electricity, and negotiates prices with the providers. These services, as well as the rent, have to be paid by the families themselves. Based on the information gathered in our questionnaires, the UNHCR used to give monthly support of \$173/family plus \$27/person, but these amounts are not enough and families often struggle to cover the basic costs of living. Consequently, most families are forced to send those older than 12 years to work informally. Children and women are often occupied in agriculture jobs under the rule and protection of their Shaweesh. Hence, he decides when and where they work and how much they earn, with these conditions being, at the least, exploitive. Currently, and due to the economic crisis that the country is overwhelmed by, the salary barely reaches \$1/day for a working day of 8-12 hours.

During our visit to the country in 2016, we researched an informal settlement in the area of Terbol with a total population of 854 refugees, most of them children. The household distribution in the settlement was flexible and more than half of the refugees could decide where to settle. This decision was mostly based on the place of origin, rather than arrival time. Hence, meetings between family members and friends occurred often and were more similar to traditional meeting patterns they had in Syria.

Household sizes varied from one to twenty people, with six people being the average size. Given the autonomy of the self-constructing shelters, shelter sizes were adapted to the households' needs. Moreover, during the construction of the informal settlement, the UNHCR distributed prefabricated cubicle latrines for every household. Thus, their privacy was respected and they felt secure when going to the toilet or taking a shower. The international agency nonetheless did not build a sewage system, and consequently some households had plastic pipes transporting wastewater into a septic tank, while others threw the wastewater into an open canal. This created a highly insalubrious environment with tangible health hazards for refugees.

The lack of basic services in the informal settlement was not only infrastructural, but also service-related. Many children did not have the opportunity to attend school, given the lack of places made available by the Lebanese government. The Ministry of Education created an afternoon school shift for Syrian refugees, yet places were insufficient and not every family could afford associated transportation costs. The lack of logistical facilities together with the economic difficulties of the families led to a generation of illiterate children, who will eventually have very limited job opportunities (The Guardian, 2014).

Several NGOs were involved in the settlement, aiming to fill some of the infrastructural and service-related gaps generated by this governance system. For example, one international NGO was in charge of monthly dislodging the septic tank, others provided basic services such as primary education, sexual and reproductive health education, or infrastructural help. Still, the assistance was, as mentioned by several refugees, irregular and depended entirely on the Shaweesh's contacts.

Discussion and conclusion

In both case studies, each country's asylum policy determined the creation of one or other type of segrega-

tive refugee settlement: a UN-planned camp in Jordan, and an informal settlement in Lebanon. Each type of settlement presented a particular governance system, which impacted the refugees' quality of life in the settlements and their access to rights differently.

On the one hand, the UN-planned camp at Azraq neglected mainly three basic rights of refugees. Firstly, there was a lack of mobility rights, as refugees were forced to stay within the camp's borders, and there were very few legal ways of leaving the camp. Secondly, there was a lack of work and entrepreneurial rights and very few opportunities for refugees to obtain any means of livelihood beyond food vouchers, free bread and services offered by aid agencies. Lastly, the top-down organization of the camp limited the capacity of refugees to make decisions, thus hindering their political and self-governance rights. Decision makers were mainly aid-agency workers, and there was no relevant representation system to give refugees access to the camp's political structure. In this context, refugees were purely passive recipients of aid (Herz, 2012). This situation produced a general feeling among refugees of not having enough of anything, excessive waiting time along with constant inactivity and an uncertain future. These factors developed a perception of having a determined life, jeopardized trust towards authorities, and created great feelings of insecurity, especially among women.

On the other hand, the informal refugee settlement in Bekaa Valley had, compared to Azraq, a bottom-up governance approach, allowing refugees to, for example, choose their placement in the settlement or adapt their housing units to their families' sizes. Refugees in this settlement had no limitations on movement beyond the settlement borders, and thus had access to external working opportunities. These opportunities were, as mentioned above, often exploitive and promoted child labour. Moreover, the lack of water sanitation infrastructure dramatically increased the risk of environmental pollution and health hazards for refugees. Furthermore, childrens' right to education was not guaranteed, since access to the Lebanese school system was restricted and the presence of external aid in this sector was not always guaranteed.

Although Lebanon and Jordan are signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of the chosen segregative approaches are hindering refugees' full access to human rights.⁵ As an alternative to

these segregative hosting scenarios, a more integrative approach should be fostered in existing urban contexts. These could ensure a more decent future for refugees and better guarantee their access to human rights. Potential key stakeholders in assuring the access to human rights are cities. Indeed, Lefebvre defined the Right to the City, entailing equal access to urban life, work, housing and services, participation in political processes and the co-creation of urban space (Lefebvre, 1968).

Temporality is a complicated matter in refugee situations, often thought to be short term but frequently becoming protracted realities. Camps might be an efficient humanitarian mechanism to keep people alive during the first weeks after an emergency, however they fail to offer an acceptable range of human rights that ensure long term refugees' psychological wellbeing.

Moreover, camps are—both in the unlikely scenario of a short duration or in protracted scenarios—economically and ecologically unsustainable due to their temporary nature. The example of Azraq camp highlighted how building ex-novo planned UN camps requires a high economic investment from international donors. The example of an informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley sheds light on the hazards to environmental and human health that arise from poor and short-sighted planning and construction. In both cases, building temporary refugee camps entails the use of significant material and economic resources without the guarantee of future reuse or sustainable management once the emergency situation is over.

In view of this, cities and towns can offer more sustainable alternatives for hosting refugees than camps, in economic, ecological and social terms. Hosting refugees within cities or other spatially inclusive spaces can leverage existing infrastructures and require less investment than camps, where all infrastructure must be newly constructed. International aid is needed in cities in low- and middle-income countries where resources are limited and the load of refugees is far surpassing their absorbing capacity. International donors—but also humanitarian aid—should step away from the tradition of building camps to focus on improving existing infrastructure within welcoming cities. These improvements would also benefit the local populations and last once the hosting emergency crisis is over. Lastly, such investments could positively impact local populations' views on refugees, as they would attract economical and social resources.

To conclude, segregative camps have raised a lot of questions, especially in terms of human rights. All

⁵ In both cases, Articles 1, 2, 17, 22 of the UDHR are not respected. Specifically, in Lebanon the Articles 4, 9, 26 and in Jordan the Articles 12, 13.1, 23 are not complied with.

efforts used to create segregative refugee spaces are a missed opportunity to improve local cities' infrastructure and services, which would benefit both the refugee and the host community.

Acknowledging that refugee crises are rarely temporary will foster improved hosting strategies that embrace long-term infrastructure planning as well as more appropriate foundations for respecting refugees' human rights through social, economic and spatial inclusion. Cities are, as discussed above, the most sustainable and inclusive option. At a time when the global number of refugees is growing steadily, cities must be prepared to fulfil their full potential and welcome those forced to flee their homes.

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