ARE SYRIA’S DO-IT-YOURSELF REFUGEES OUTLIERS OR EXAMPLES OF A NEW NORM?

Lionel Beehner

Refugee camps are often treated as incubators of social unrest, violence, terrorism, and illicit trade. This provokes their overseers in the United Nations (UN) and other relief agencies to conduct frequent social engineering to enhance the camps’ legibility. Hence, we see orderly, perpendicular rows, standardized units from redistricting to the allocation of diapers, and so forth—all of the follies of high modernism that James Scott predicted in Seeing Like a State, but writ small. Indeed, my qualitative research from the Za’atari refugee camp, located in Jordan along the Syrian border, indicates that refugees, especially middle-class ones like Syria’s, rebel against uniformity—or what Scott describes as “metis”—and seek to recreate their domiciles as best they can from the meager canvas tents and campers allotted to them. Put simply, they see their surroundings more as the disorderly “sidewalk ballet” of Jane Jacobs’ Greenwich Village than the high modernist yet sterile functionalism of Robert Moses. This holds important policy implications for the future of how we devise refugee camps, which increasingly resemble small cities; how we settle internally displaced persons (IDPs); and how we deal with the aftermath of mass population displacements. From direct cash transfers to the districting of refugees, some bureaucratic flexibility is required but so is an acknowledgement and embrace of refugees’ do-it-yourself ethos that is rooted in their resistance to authority and trauma from violence. Drawing from the literature in social anthropology and political science, this article presents new evidence from Za’atari that disputes the utility of a high modernist approach to the social engineering of large displaced populations.

“We design refugee camps; refugees build cities,” Kilian Kleinschmidt, UN director of Za’atari.”1 Over the past few decades, the total number of people displaced by war, natural disasters, and other calamities has eclipsed 50 million. That is the highest number since the aftermath of World War II, despite the number of conflict zones continuing to ebb in recent years.2 Refugee camps have swelled in numbers and have essentially transformed into makeshift cities. Demand has far outstripped supply, as these camps have become overcrowded,

Lionel Beehner is a PhD Candidate at Yale University and is a former visiting scholar at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute. Email: lionel.beehner@yale.edu.
underfunded, and under-resourced.

Reports of crime, prostitution, violence, and health epidemics are common in most camps. Like favelas or urban slums, they are often treated as incubators of social unrest, terrorism, and illicit markets. This threat has prompted UN administrators, aid agencies, and receiving states to conduct substantial top-down social engineering to enhance camps' legibility and uniformity.3 We see orderly perpendicular rows, standardized domiciles, and top-down micromanagement, from redistricting to the allocation of diapers—all of the follies of high modernism that Yale University's James Scott predicted in Seeing Like a State, but writ small.4 Migration scholar Jennifer Hyndman has likened the policing strategies in Kenya’s refugee camps to those of former European colonial administrators.5

Given that such top-down standardization is harmful for human interaction and enterprise, this approach, while efficient on paper, ignores modern realities and may even exacerbate the very threat it seeks to mitigate. This article makes two main arguments. First, refugee camps have the potential to become more than just makeshift temporary shelters for displaced persons; they can become engines of social and economic dynamism. Such a philosophy can not only help refugees become self-sufficient and self-reliant, providing a socioeconomic outlet and reducing the rate of recruitment into criminal or terrorist networks by shrinking the informal economy, but can also help the host state and its local economy.

There are some 3,500 small businesses in existence within the Syrian refugee camp I visited.6 These outlets of entrepreneurship provide refugees suffering from the trauma of war with a coping mechanism, prevent idleness, and boost remittances sent back home. But they can also alleviate some of the economic burden placed on the regions encompassing the camps, potentially reducing host governments' need for targeted development assistance (TDA), as well as lessen tensions between local and refugee populations.7 However, implementing this philosophy will require camp officials and host governments to resist Robert Moses-like impulses to implement one-size-fits-all schema solely focused on ensuring security and instead to embrace a more grassroots, do-it-yourself ethos—one that allows for a greater degree of flexibility, spontaneity, and creativity in how camps are constructed, organized, and administered.8 (These two views are not mutually exclusive, a point I elucidate later.)

Second, I argue that such social engineering efforts are in fact counterproductive to enhancing security in refugee camps, both for the refugees themselves and for the host state, as they foster resentment between administrative staff, local authorities, and the refugees, hindering cooperation. Put otherwise, humanitarian agencies and local authorities should treat refugee camps less as transitional holding pens full of potential threats in need of Foucauldian discipline and more

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like organic cities of semi-permanence.9

To bolster this point, I draw from firsthand ethnographic evidence collected from the world’s second largest refugee camp, Za’atari, located in Jordan along its border with Syria. Through participant observation and dozens of semi-structured interviews of refugees, aid workers, and camp officials along the Syrian border, my research suggests that many refugees, especially middle-class, urban, and educated ones from Syria, rebel against uniformity and actively seek to recreate their domiciles as best they can from the meager canvas tents and campers allotted to them. Put simply—and not to stretch the analogy too far—they see their newfound surroundings more like the disorderly “sidewalk ballet” in the mind of Jane Jacobs’ 1960s Greenwich Village than the high modernist functionalism of Robert Moses’ vision of urban planning.10 In that way, contrary to being blights on the landscape or dens of crime, refugee camps in some cases have emerged as oases of order, a testament to their inhabitants’ bottom-up efforts at entrepreneurship and “new urbanism.” This observation holds important normative implications for how aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) conceptualize the future of refugee camps, how states resettle IDPs, and how the international community deals with the aftermath of mass population displacements.

To be sure, the drive among local authorities and aid workers for greater order and legibility is not motivated by some nefarious desire to impose a kind of Gramscian hegemony.11 It is instead the by-product of bureaucratic inertia, a lack of resources, as well as a system that places the host state’s security above the sovereignty of the individual refugee. It is a product, at least in part, of the “fog of war”—Za’atari was literally erected in a matter of days during the summer of 2012—as well as of a system prone to a lack of experimentation and new ideas. The Office of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) officials I met were extremely competent, well-intentioned, and even in agreement with the need to avoid too much centralized planning.

There has been no shortage of scholarly attention paid to the plight of refugees, but there has been little attention to date on how the construction, organization, and administration of refugee camps can contribute to security threats or vice versa.12 The assumption among both government and NGO officials is that law and order and human security should correlate, a version of the “broken-windows”

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paradigm to enforcing social order. This philosophy has motivated bureaucratic efforts to subdivide camps into microdistricts, each with their own set of bylaws, codes, schools, civilian police units, health facilities, and other norms, institutions, and agencies.

This article relies on data collected over the course of two separate research trips to the Syrian border, first to the Turkish-Syrian border in October 2012 and second to the Jordanian-Syrian border in August 2013. Dozens of Syrian refugees, aid workers, and government and UN officials were interviewed on both the Jordanian and Turkish sides of the border.

The bulk of the qualitative evidence—or participant observation, if you will—comes from an August 2013 trip to Za’atari and from interviewing “urban refugees” scattered in towns near the camp. This article is organized as follows: a brief tracing of the history of how refugee camps have been perceived and treated in social science literature, from a humanitarian crisis to a looming potential security threat. Then, background is provided on the refugee crisis in Syria and some stylized facts about Za’atari specifically, before examining how high modernism has given way to greater decentralization and followed by normative and prescriptive analysis.

A HISTORY OF THE DISPLACED

Refugee camps in the modern age have become cities unto themselves, mostly to accommodate their swelling populations—16.7 million worldwide in 2013, 1.2 million more than the previous year—but also to accommodate the changing tastes, preferences, idiosyncrasies, and attitudes of the refugees. Put simply, the image of the barefoot and bedraggled refugee is increasingly an anachronism of past generations in some regions. Today’s refugees are on average economically better off, more sophisticated, and generally more entrepreneurial than their predecessors. Refugee camps, moreover, are no longer makeshift networks of tents and trailers walled off from the outside world by concertina wire. Many are now sprawling communities replete with paved streets, subdivisions, and microdistricts, each with their own “mayors,” schools, health facilities, and exclusive sets of norms and city-like problems. To take one example, in Za’atari, pizza delivery is available, as well as airport shuttle service provided by a travel agency.

This was not always the case. For much of the twentieth century, camps were seen as a functional response to forced displacement from wars, natural disasters, famines, political persecution, and other calamities, both natural and manmade.
They were erected to provide temporary shelters and safe areas to distribute basic goods and services: food, potable water, clothing, tents, blankets, and so forth. Even today, over 80 percent of refugees are found in the developing world, the bulk of whom reside in camps or cramped urban dwellings.\(^{15}\) Their presence adds further strain on states already struggling to survive. They live cooped up in camps not for a few months but rather for over five years on average. Host governments are conflicted between creating a camp with a sense of semi-permanence, for fear that the refugees will not want to leave, and guarding against the dangers that camps can become dens of infectious disease, violence, and extremism. The result is that most camps try to strike a middle ground whereby their conditions are tolerable in the short term but not for the long term.

Refugees do not fit into any neat classification. For much of the Cold War era, they could be loosely characterized as impoverished, less educated, and largely unwanted by their host countries.\(^{16}\) A common trait refugees now tend to share and try to overcome is one of "fear," according to Northwestern University's Wendy Pearlman.\(^{17}\) It should also be noted that refugees, unlike other people who flee the enclosure of the state, are not doing so out of their own conviction. They are not willful or stateless nomads like Berbers or Bedouins—if given the choice, we can assume they would prefer their prewar lives under the structure of the state. A common refrain heard within Za'atari is, "Better to die in a tent in Syria than a palace in Jordan." They run the gamut in terms of social hierarchy. In Syria, the most affluent with means were the ones able to flee the fighting. But in other contexts, often it is the worst-off economically who flee. Maya Rosenfeld describes the first wave of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank as, "former peasants who had lost their land and other sources of livelihood and whose subsistence subsequently came to depend on wage labor opportunities and on meager relief provisions."\(^{18}\) However, in Za'atari, I met refugees from all walks of life, income levels, and professions.\(^{19}\)

Refugees face a catch-22 in terms of perceptions from their hosts. The most notorious camps become synonymous with criminals, ghettos, and threats to the government, and so are resented by the local populations. Karen refugees in Thai camps, for example, faced hostilities and other human rights violations and were not permitted to manage their own schools or teach in their native tongue. Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Ismael Sheikh Hassan and Sari Hanafi write, became hotbeds of Palestinian Liberation Organization radicalism and the sites of large-scale massacres during the country's civil war.\(^{20}\) But refugee camps that prosper are also resented because they tend to be seen as competing with locals for resources, such as water or arable land. Or they tend to become semi-permanent settlements, thus drawing resentment from outsiders who may face less prosperous
conditions outside the camp walls than inside them. As one example, Jordan globally ranks fourth in water insecurity and requires its citizens to ration water consumption. But in Za’atari, more than a million gallons of water are trucked in each day, allowing refugees to plant gardens and even open a pool (it was eventually closed, reportedly for health reasons).21

Despite correlations between refugee crises and Cold War-era conflicts, for several decades such crises have been treated as a non-security issue, a humanitarian problem to be resolved by looser asylum or migration policies or perhaps stronger human rights norms. Refugees were perceived as victims with basic human rights. The emphasis before the 1980s was less on ensuring the host state’s security than on protecting the victims. As scholar Edward Mogire writes, “Refugees come first; hosts come second, if at all.”22 The mindset changed as our conceptualization of security studies, which until then only entailed the strategic use of military force, evolved to include nonstate actors such as displaced persons and refugees. Toward the end of the Cold War, there was a perception shift as refugees came to be seen as security threats, and the emphasis shifted to the protection of the host state’s security and its population. The discourse on refugees also evolved; refugees’ movements were referred to as “flooding,” “swamping,” or “invading” an area—language that depicts a scourge to be “countered” or “defeated.”23 Discursively, such refugees, especially after the events of September 11th, were linked to global terrorism and other criminal syndicates. During the 1990s, refugees became active participants in rebellions and wars in the African Great Lakes region, East Timor, and the Balkans. One theory has it that the absence of superpower largess for rebels made refugee camps more attractive targets to secure resources, both financial (bribes) and human (recruits). This made it more difficult for UN administrators to differentiate fighters from refugees.

The result was that camps, and the new construction of camps, were grouped into the broader transnational security studies discourse, and all inhabitants were treated as potential threats to be controlled, rather than as displaced victims of conflict in need of asylum.24 Open discussion by external parties of direct military interventions into refugee camps was not uncommon, and the UN authorized an array of Chapter VII enforcement operations in Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Rwanda to address refugee security threats.25 Despite their recurrent use, legal opinion is
divided on whether interventions to prevent refugee crises are even justified under international law.\textsuperscript{26} There were also divisions of opinion over how to best administer the camps amid shrinking budgets and growing demand. As displaced communities persisted and proliferated, they only were seen as more of a threat to the host state. In response, these camps became more organized and regimented. Consider the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in Lebanon, which became militarized by Fatah al-Islam foreign Islamists. To guard against the looming threat, Lebanese officials followed in the footsteps of other states, taking a high-minded and schematic approach to enhance the camp's legibility, but one that sapped all cultural and community life. As Hassan and Hanafi write:

Security-related issues raised by the military dictated all spatial and design considerations. These included streets ten to fifteen meters-wide laid out on a grid as well as standardized apartments for the refugees within free-standing (rather than connected) housing blocks. The army believed that such provisions would prevent "terrorists" from breaking through walls to escape and, by facilitating the entry into the camp space of tanks and armored vehicles, would allow for efficient security control... However, the military's preponderant role continued to influence the camp's design as the plan was fine-tuned after the general agreement. The army consistently opposed miscellaneous items such as the installation of handicap ramps on streets (because they might obstruct security vehicles) and the addition of balconies on buildings (presumably because of their potential to conceal street movement from aerial surveillance). It also mandated the ceiling height of ground floor shops to limit the final height of the building. Some of the project's technical designers automatically self-adapted their designs to anticipate security concerns that the army might have in order to prevent additional delays called for by army demands for redesign. For example, infrastructure engineers considered designing pipes with smaller radii in case the military objected that "terrorists" could crawl through larger ones.\textsuperscript{27}

In short, they write that the camp had become "one large prison."\textsuperscript{28} The larger implication of the newfound emphasis on the host state's security over victim and refugee rights was that all camps were crime-ridden zones in need of military, Panopticon-like policing. But in their placement of security above all issues, good governance, economic rights, and individual human sovereignty suffered. Moreover, the traditional social fabric and routine patterns of daily life were ripped from refugees, breeding an unavoidable kind of resentment. Even the presence of humanitarian aid did little to mollify such situations. As Luca Ciabarri
writes, "The relationship is marked by conflict and mistrust: refugees' consumption appears like a siege, a battle, subversion, and clashes with the humanitarian institution's wish for absolute control. Such a production of mistrust, and the tense relationship which actually constitutes a typical trait of aid dynamics in the region, is one of the effects of the peculiar bond built up between external aid and local dynamics over time."29

Refugee camps are no longer oases of anarchy but rather are often oases of order.

This article builds on this body of insight to highlight how a high-modernist mindset and overemphasis on security can have unforeseen and negative consequences on refugee camps and make such communities less secure by converting them into de facto penitentiaries and hindering economic growth. The implication is that camps should be less regimented and more flexible in their design to draw on local customs.

FLEEING CONFLICT

The linkages between refugee camps and violence are well documented, though there is dispute over the mechanisms at play.30 Increasingly, scholars have found that refugees are both a cause and a consequence of conflict.31 The sending country and the host country often mobilize forces against the other, thus escalating cross-border tensions and sowing the seeds for conflict. The easy availability of arms and smuggling networks allow for refugee "militarization."32 Refugees can also pose economic burdens on their host states, many of which are already poor to begin with, explaining why so many countries do not want refugees semi-permanently settled.33 Communities of displaced people foster competition with the local population over scarce resources. They drive up prices for food, rent, and fuel, angering locals in the process. Terrorism scholars have found that refugee camps are fertile ground for recruitment, while activists have documented vast human rights violations both within camps and between refugees and local populations, especially concerning the trafficking of humans.34

What has changed remarkably over the course of the past half-century is that refugee camps, which are typically housed in weak countries suffering from war or bordering conflict zones, are no longer oases of anarchy but rather are often oases of order and, in some limited cases, even thriving economically. After Lebanese authorities razed the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp to the ground in 2007, following Hezbollah's war with Israel, to permanently remove its Islamist elements, "it became the most controlled site in a country where the state is constantly struggling to control its national territory."35 Moreover, refugee camps along Somalia's border were net recipients of remittances during the early 1990s,
but by the 2000s, major nearby towns were receiving more remittances from the camps than vice versa. As Ciabarri documents:

Through all the above activities a complete transformation of the nature of the camp occurred. The new shops, the circulation of goods, the movement of people, can be viewed as contributing factors in the socialization of the place, replacing the artificial establishment of the camp in an area which was previously a small Ethiopian military camp controlling the boundary. In fact, it became much like a Somali town or, indeed, actually became one. It was essentially a big market and—as it was reported to me—a booming area capable of attracting people and investment from Borama town, making it a focus for the economic recovery of the whole region.36

This is not to paint too rosy a picture of refugee camp life—which is most accurately characterized by monotony and boredom as much as it can be by fear or suffering—but rather to emphasize that camps, left unregulated, have the same dynamic capacity to become engines of economic growth as they do to become incubators of violence. The trick is striking the right balance between imposing order and preserving individual empowerment. This is where the lesson from Za'atari is instructive.

LESSONS FROM ZA'ATARI

Ahead of my August 2013 visit to Za'atari, much of the debate over the unfolding refugee crisis, which at the time was nearing the unfortunate marker of being the world's second largest, was on how to handle the crisis from a financial perspective. Aid targets for funds from private donors had largely gone unmet, even as the number of refugees spiked to well over 2 million (now the number is above 3 million, excluding the 4 million internally displaced). There was persistent debate over the efficacy of handing out conditional versus unconditional cash assistance, or so-called TDA.

A year into the Syrian civil war, Za'atari was erected in a parched and empty plot of desert just south of the Syrian border, "in a span of nine days," as one UNHCR official told me. "Before that there were just some Bedouin camps and some camels."37 They had to truck in pebbles because the land was so sandy. On paper, the camp is a model of social engineering and efficiency. Za'atari costs roughly $500,000 per day to run and sprawls for 1.3 square miles to accommodate 25,000 households. At the outset, UN officials appeared driven by aesthetic impulses as much as they were by outcomes. "The carriers of high modernism tended to see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms," as Scott writes. "For them, an efficient, rationally organized city, village, or farm was a city that
looked regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense.” Hence, on paper and in reality, Za‘atari looked like a legible grid, both to create a sense of a rationalized order and ostensibly to enhance the camp’s legibility—a kind of Potemkin Village to appease outsiders, donors, and visitors like me. I heard numerous mentions from officials of creating a “model” refugee camp. This is social engineering on a smaller scale—though to be fair, Za‘atari, were it an actual city, would be the fourth largest in Jordan.

The camp was later divided into twelve administrative subdistricts, each a grid of roughly twenty-five blocks and comprising upwards of sixty caravans. Each caravan, khaki colored and sheathed in vinyl brown siding, with a few slits of light peeking in from tiny windows, costs $18,000 apiece and is locally made in Jordan. The names of streets are also numbered (e.g., “Street 17”). The distribution of resources to the camp is decided in a small, air-conditioned trailer outfitted with white dry-erase boards, giant maps of the camp, and water coolers. As one UN official told me, they sought to, “urbanize and transition it from a normal refugee camp and more toward a temporary city.” There was no shortage of projects in the works, including discussions of starting a kind of “Kickstarter”-like campaign to fund a bike-sharing program because of the camp’s lack of adequate transportation. One of the top priorities listed on a dry-erase board was “diaper replenishment” (with a cost of $5 million). There was also discussion of creating a civil district administration to decentralize decisionmaking to the twelve districts.

At the UNHCR headquarters, I examined a map from 2013 that showed rows upon tidy rows of such caravans in a legible and uniform grid. But a strange thing happened after Za‘atari was opened the previous summer; refugees kept picking up their trailers to cluster next to their kinfolk or friends, as one with means might do in any metropolis. The trailers began to look less like perpendicular rows of orderliness and more like improvised cul-de-sacs and spaghetti-like clusters (residents were discouraged but not prevented from moving their domiciles). A number of refugee families combined their tents or trailers with a lean-to to replicate the Ottoman merchant houses native to Syria. In other words, in an attempt to impose a formulaic, top-down, high-modernist legibility to the camp, the refugees silently resisted by remaking the camp into a desert version of Jacobs’ Greenwich Village.

And this is not just a phenomenon unique to Za‘atari or Syrians. Consider what Nadia Latif writes about Palestinian refugees based in a refugee camp south of Beirut: “Refugees’ desire to regroup along kin and village lines led to members of
the same extended family and inhabitants of the same village pitching their tents
near one another."

The similarities between Za'atari and any city of 120,000 residents were
striking. There was urban sprawl, as districts 1 and 2 had become over-congested.
Like the suburbanization of an American city, the more well-to-do refugees, often
from Damascus or its suburbs, preferred to live in districts 11 and 12, which are
also further from the central thoroughfare of shops and food stalls but are less
crowded. (Imagine an inverted clock, with districts 1 and 2 in the top-left corner
and 11 and 12 in the top right). There is a Safeway in Za'atari. The busiest street
was christened the "Champs Elysees," after the famous street in Paris, France. It is
possible to try on a wedding gown, shoot billiards, and buy a solar panel without
straying from the street. There is also a homemade ice cream vendor, a pet shop,
and a flower store.

The refugees who came to Za'atari, while certainly all different, share some
common attributes. As mentioned before, they are largely middle-class families by
Syrian standards—educated, though often heavily in debt. Most of the refugees
were better off than those who remained in Syria, given how expensive it is to flee.
A former cab driver from Aleppo I interviewed described how, after paying bribes
at checkpoints, it cost him and his family of seven over $1,000 to get to Jordan.
One aid worker said in half jest, "They all have better cell phones than I have." The
vast majority of those interviewed have familial connections in Jordan and hopped
around a half-dozen times before fleeing (crossing the border is typically their
least-desired option). They all never thought they would have to move and only
did so as a means of last resort. Well over half of those interviewed lost at least
one family member or their home to the war, and often it is not just households
but whole villages that relocate together.

All of the refugees I interviewed believed that the war would be brief. They
refused to get too settled into daily life—some did not even unpack—for fear of the
prospect of their temporary displacement becoming more permanent. Also, there
was a disproportionate burden placed on women. A number of husbands either
perished in the war or stayed in Syria to fight or earn a living, leaving the wife and
her children to flee for safety. Thus, there are a disproportionate number of female-
headed households in Za'atari, and early marriage for daughters is not uncommon.
Women also face sexual violence and often refuse to leave their tents or trailers
after dusk. The sound of gunfire and bombs can be heard across the Syrian border,
which is 15 kilometers north of the camp.

Finally, Syrian refugees distrusted authority and outsiders in particular. This
was confirmed not only by the UN and NGO staff I interviewed, but also by
the refugees themselves. Many are bitter about their treatment, given how many
refugees from previous conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq they hosted. "They had high expectations," one NGO worker told me. "We are a people of pride. Why are we being treated like this?" a female refugee told me. Indeed, because many of the refugees were from middle-class backgrounds, they resented the living conditions in Za'atari, from the lack of privacy to sharing a communal bathroom. One Syrian I spoke with called it the "Camp of Death." Another told me, "It's terrible. I only lasted twenty-four hours there."

But Syrians are a unique breed of refugees, given that they were not accustomed to officials, much less Western ones, offering free public goods. After all, there is no equivalent of a civil society in Syria that would replicate what UN officials do within Za'atari. "They are not used to handouts," one NGO worker explained to me. "Their motto was, 'Just give me a stove, an onion, and some garlic.'" A common complaint was the bad food, especially the foul-tasting rice and "cheap bread." Syrians are known as much for their hospitality as for their cuisine, which has Ottoman, Jewish, Armenian, and French influences. One NGO worker I spoke with recalled how Syrian refugees would smuggle stoves into the camp. The best falafel in Jordan, according to an unscientific poll of aid workers, is in Za'atari. They are also known for their ingenuity to pass the time—idleness was perhaps the most common complaint heard among younger refugees. One woman I met recycled old tomato cans into decorative teacups. A vegetable seller had set up a satellite TV fashioned together from electronic components. "People are very creative," a UN official told me. "They are constructing their own toilets. They are making their own maize and planting tomatoes in their gardens." As a refugee camp architect told the New York Times, "Organic development, driven by refugees, is unstoppable. Impermanence costs more in the long run. Whether you encourage growth in the right ways or you fight it, it's going to happen anyway."

The area of Syria most refugees are from, Daraa, is actually quite green. Thus, the refugees noted their desire to see more greenery around them—the immediate surroundings of Za'atari offer nothing but desert littered with black plastic bags. Syrians like to have gardens; the wealthiest of those who fled had houses in Daraa cobbled from old Ottoman merchant homes with built-in gardens. So many Syrian refugees in Za'atari, as I previously mentioned, retrofitted their prefabricated caravans to include a canopy and makeshift "garden." By one estimate, there were over 150 such gardens in the camp. "Of all the refugee camps I have seen," said a senior World Food Program (WFP) official, "I have never seen one as innovative, resourceful, and industrious as this one." Camps can address residents' complaints and create a more bearable lifestyle by being less regimented and more flexible in their schematic design to draw on locally held customs and individual entrepreneurship.

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The need for some top-down schematic structure is not entirely unfounded. Vandalism in the washrooms, kitchens, and against the camp's water tanks, was not uncommon. A senior WFP official told me it was possible to document which parts of Za'atari are unsafe based on the quality of the bathrooms: "If they are immaculate, it brings with it that much more civic coherence."13 UN officials complained of being pelted with pebbles as they passed by in their vans. Much of the violence was attributed to "a small group of troublemakers." The high numbers of female-led households and reports of sexual violence fed the creation of neighborhood watch committees to patrol districts in hopes of reducing petty crime, as well as the establishment of informal discussion groups among women to discuss social and family issues. (Many of the inhabitants come from conservative backgrounds.) As a Somali refugee from another refugee camp told a UNHCR official, "It is of no advantage for us to get a full ration from the UNHCR if our lives are always at risk from insecurity."14

The purpose of this article is not to say there is no need for some degree of social order, cleanliness, and legibility within any grouping of 100,000-plus people, much less people who have just suffered the trauma of war. It should be noted that refugee camps like Za'atari are vastly understaffed and grossly underfunded, so any hectoring by academics should be taken with a grain of salt. Nor do overarching theories adequately appreciate the sui generis challenges to each environment or the importance of local know-how and buy-in. Karen refugees in Thailand, for instance, are vastly different from Syrian refugees in Jordan, and any attempt to suggest a one-size-fits-all solution is ludicrous.

It is important to acknowledge the real security risks refugees and host communities face. The frontier region north of Za'atari is known as a popular smuggling route for cigarettes, sex workers, fuel, and drugs like ecstasy. There are militia elements within the camp that are there mainly for profit, as well as to recruit young men into the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella opposition group fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Each district of the camp has a leader. "Behind that leader is another leader," said a senior UNHCR official I spoke to. "There are a lot of networks. The informal economy is flourishing." There is an anything-goes ethos to the camp that administrators and refugees find unsettling. "Everything is possible in Za'atari," said a former cafe owner from Daraa, who now resides nearby. "You can propose to any daughter or any girl [in Za'atari], and you will marry her very fast."

Too much micromanagement is prone to backfire and foster resentment.
So then, why is too much legibility harmful? I advance two arguments: First, while aimed at maximizing legibility, too much micromanagement is prone to backfire and foster resentment, much as it does outside of refugee camps in the “real” world. This creates an unnecessary tension. If security is the goal of such a top-down schema, aside from making the delivery of goods and services more efficient, then sowing distrust between aid administrators and the refugees is counterproductive. Second, it stifles economic development, innovation, and creativity, which can in turn invite a larger black market. Most UN staffers I spoke with are in agreement on this point. Refugee camps like Za’atari demonstrate their economic vitality. Syrians are prohibited from legally working in Jordan, but, as previously mentioned, an estimated 3,500 small shops have opened in Za’atari. There is some evidence that such camps can help influence norms of refugees for the better. As one UN official told me, she hoped the Syrians she met would bring home norms of “good governance.” The World Bank has estimated that remittances to developing nations, fueled by the rise of forced migration, is set to spike 5 percent from 2014. It remains unclear how much of this money is flowing between Syrian refugees and their family members in Syria as well as vice versa, given banking restrictions in Syria, but presumably Syrians can earn more competitive wages in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan than in wartime Syria and receive more remittances. According to an October 2014 World Bank report, “Anecdotal evidence also suggests that remittances are sent to these neighboring countries, and then transported over the border to Syria, as sending remittances directly to Syria is becoming increasingly difficult. Banks in Syria are no longer allowed to receive remittances from certain Gulf countries, and sending remittances out of Syria is blocked by currency controls. Overall, remittances to Syria are expected to grow modestly. Remittances to host countries Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey are likely to continue rising.”

There is also fear that by loosening control over the camp’s orderliness, the diaper dispensers will go unchanged, the washrooms will go uncleaned, and so forth, risking a “broken windows”-like downward spiral in social order. The solution is not to abandon all tasks to create the outward appearance of normalcy, but rather to decentralize such tasks to those more familiar with local tastes and customs. As Scott writes, “[F]ormal schemes of order are untenable without some elements of the practical knowledge that they tend to dismiss.” Here the UNHCR’s subdistricting of Za’atari is to be applauded. The districts correlate mostly with the timing of when a refugee household arrived at Za’atari, but also with their district of origin in Syria, thus allowing the decentralization of decision-making to fall in line with local preferences in Syria.

Another common theme was complaints about poor sanitation. As one refugee
told me, "They are a very private culture and obsessed with cleanliness."48 Refugees began constructing their own makeshift toilets, which look like tiny moats carved in the sand under their tents and trailers. Consider also the fastidious preparation Syrians take to prepare their food or the tiny stoves they smuggled into the camp. Another common gripe within Za'atari was the cold weather. The desert climate means hot days but frigid nights, which is why the first thing new residents often purchase with their ration cards—much to administrators' surprise—is not food or water, but rather wool quilts for warmth (the caravans are poorly insulated). A woman I met, whose husband and two of her five daughters were killed when an airstrike leveled their house in Daraa, pointed to a stack of such blankets in the corner of her sparsely furnished trailer. This was common across Za'atari.49

An alternative hypothesis is that Za'atari is sui generis because its residents tend to be middle class, and the camp is seen as more "high end" than those in Africa and elsewhere. Thus, it is dangerous to generalize from a camp that may be unrepresentative of the norm. But we hear similar stories of refugee "norms of entrepreneurship" in camps with more appalling conditions. As Ciabarri writes about Somaliland, "The camps fueled the dispersal of the Somalilanders into different communities scattered across the world, and they were also the place where big money transfer or communications companies were born. Moreover, the same extensive entrepreneurial spirit which emerged in the camps now characterizes the urban landscape."50 Indeed, the concept of confining households to uniform trailers or tents in numbered, orderly rows is about as foreign a concept to a Syrian as it is to a Somalilander. The experience, as evidenced by dozens of refugees' testimonies, is not just jarring, but also humiliating—akin to the standardized layouts of Southern plantations, to maximize legibility and minimize rebellion. Then there are the moral hazards countries face to avoid creating permanent camps. In Lebanon, after all, 10 percent of its population is Palestinian, many of whom reside within twelve official camps (or in the twenty-seven unofficial "gatherings" outside of the camps, where they have limited rights).51

CONCLUSION

This article advanced two central arguments: First, refugee camps can be engines of economic growth for both the host governments and the sending countries, but bureaucracy aimed at increasing legibility and security hinders bottom-up social enterprise and dynamism. Second, micromanagement and a forced

The antidote is not a heavy-handed approach that emphasizes security above human sovereignty.
monotony in terms of camp structure only serves to exacerbate tensions between relief agencies, the host governments, and the refugees. I make the case for greater flexibility and decentralization of decisionmaking. The Foucauldian approach to the construction and organization of refugee camps is an unfortunate by-product of the twentieth century, when violence, disorder, and rebel recruitment were all commonplace in such camps, as much as it is a function of limited budgets and stretched staffs. There was a mindset pervasive until the end of the 1990s from UN officials that human security trumped all other concerns for inhabitants and that violence was endemic. Such problems exist today, but given the growing semi-permanency of these camps, the antidote is not a heavy-handed approach that emphasizes security above human sovereignty.

Lessons can be learned from Palestinian camps in Lebanon and from Za’atari in Jordan, whose management should be commended. They realized the need for flexibility and adaptability, and relations were turned around. This is not to dispense with security concerns, but rather to balance security needs with protecting and preserving refugees’ customs and cultures. “At first they thought everyone was against them,” said a UN official I spoke with. “Now they know we advocate on their behalf.” A system that privileges a do-it-yourself ethos and honors the customs of the camp’s inhabitants is a preferable and more sustainable model, not to mention more economically advantageous and beneficial from a security perspective.

NOTES


3 Legally, the responsibility for camp security rests with the local receiving government, not with international aid agencies or the UNHCR. See Sarah Kenyon Lischer, Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 5.


7 The logic behind targeted development assistance (TDA) is that host countries often experience a drain in resources from refugee populations, which can both fuel tensions between locals and refugees and weaken the host state’s economy. TDA is marketed as a way to convince host countries that they can benefit economically by allowing refugees to integrate because of its basic market advantages. The program allows the UN as well as donor states to specifically allocate monies to countries that host large refugee populations to help them provide better security, medical treatment, and educational training. For more, see Alexander Betts, “Development Assistance and Refugees: Towards a North-South Grand Bargain?” (briefing, Forced Migration Policy, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, England: June 2009).
For more on the former point, see Kalena E. Cortes, "Are Refugees Different from Economic Immigrants? Some empirical evidence on the heterogeneity of immigrant groups in the United States," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 86, no. 2 (March 2004), 465-480. Robert Moses was New York City's "master builder" of the mid-twentieth century, who created large-scale public works projects—as well as parks—but is criticized for uprooting many of the city's closely knit communities in favor of public highways. For more, see Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1974).

In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), the French philosopher Michel Foucault discusses Western penal systems and how inmates should internalize standardized norms of appropriate behavior and police themselves via an all-seeing Panopticon. The system, as previously described by Jeremy Bentham, provides a single watchman to observe inmates without them being able to tell whether or not they are being watched.


This is a reference to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's writings on how hegemonic dominance relies on "consented" coercion from the masses. For more, see "Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Biddles Ltd., 1971).


My first trip in October 2012 was to Gaziantep, Turkey, and was organized with the help of the Truman National Security Project and Rumi Forum. My second trip was to Amman, Jordan, and was organized and paid for by CARE International. Note that it is nearly impossible for independent researchers to gain access to camps without the backing of some relief agency. CARE organized and presumably screened the interviewees, but neither it nor UNHCR screened any of my questions or central findings. I interviewed officials from Mercy Corps, Save the Children, World Food Program, and a number of activists, journalists, and locals.


It should be noted that my sample size was biased by ethnicity and religion—all of the refugees I interviewed were Sunni Muslims and the vast majority were from Daraa, a heavily Sunni province in the south of Syria. Christians, Kurds, and other minorities, if they do flee, tend to flee either to Turkey, Iraq, or Lebanon, given the importance of familial ties to migration patterns.


Lionel Beehner, "Heed Syria's Refugee Crisis," *USA Today*, 8 September 2013.

Mogire, 23.


As Jeff Crisp of UNHCR writes, "Security has been a central concern of Kenyan refugee policy since the colonial period. But that concern has derived from a preoccupation with the security of the state, and the perception that state security is jeopardized by the presence of refugees;" Jeff Crisp, "A State of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Violence in Kenya's Refugee Camps," *African Affairs* 99, no. 397 (2000), 601-632.
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26 Alan Dowty and Gil Loescher argue that customary law allows for some preventive action against refugee flows. They write, “A country that forces its people to flee or takes actions that compel them to leave in a manner that threatens regional peace and security has in effect internationalized its internal affairs, and provides a cogent justification for policymakers elsewhere to act directly upon the source of the threat.” Hence, the intervention would be both humanitarian and aimed at restoring peace, which could require removing the offending government and still be within the bounds of proportionality. Other scholars, however, dispute the notion that a refugee crisis provides any legal basis for military intervention. Peter Malanczuk has argued that the no-fly zones imposed in Northern Iraq in 1991 were illegal because the crisis did not sufficiently meet the criteria of posing “a threat to international peace and security in the region.” Other legal experts, such as Eric Posner, argue that refugee crises get lumped under the “responsibility to protect” mantle, which he worries is too “capacious a norm to regulate states” because “it can be cited to justify virtually any intervention in the type of country that the West might want to invade, while it can also be evaded on grounds that it is not formal law.” Eric Posner, “Outside the Law: From flawed beginning to bloody end, the NATO intervention in Libya made a mockery of international law,” Foreign Policy, 25 October 2011, http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/25/outside-the-law/; Lionel Beehner, “The Geopolitics of Refugee Crises,” World Policy Journal (blog), 13 September 2012, http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/09/13/do-refugee-camps-prompt-humanitarian-intervention_.

27 Hassan and Hanafi, 38.

28 Ibid., 37.


30 There is one view that refugee camps, because they are difficult to control, become breeding grounds for criminal gangs and militant organizations. Others point to the presence of rebels who blend into the refugee populations (i.e., Hutu rebels in Rwandan refugee camps). Others point to the poor living conditions of such camps as the source of discontent, which gives rise to great militancy (see introduction of Lischer (2006) for a more in-depth explanation of the various theories).


32 Moguire; Lischer.


35 Hassan and Hanafi, 37.

36 Ciabarri, 79.

37 Much of the following information and quotes on the logistics of the camp come from interviews with UNHCR’s Aoife McDonnell and Iris Blom at the UNHCR headquarters in Za’atari (September 2012).

38 Scott, 10.


40 September 2013 interview with Ihab, a former employee of the state-run library in Damascus who now rents flats in Irbid, at the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) offices in Irbid, Jordan. Ihab, interviewed by Lionel Beehner, September 2013, Irbid, Jordan.

41 Don Weinstein, quoted in Kimmelman.
Kimmelman.

Jonathan Campbell, interviewed by Lionel Beehner, August 2013, WFP, Amman, Jordan.

Crisp.

World Bank Migration and Development Brief, "Migration and Remittances: Recent Development and Outlook, Special Topic: Forced Migration," (6 October 2014). As a November 2014 Oxfam Report ("Survey on the Livelihoods of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon") acknowledges, however, data on remittances is scarce and incomplete. "The analysis of remittances," according to the survey, "requires more rigorous investigation as most families do not disclose their income for fear that this would disqualify them from aid programs."


Scott, 7.

Syrian refugee in Za’atari, interviewed by Lionel Beehner, September 2012.

The “five-star” camps in Turkey, while considered more luxurious—inhabitants are given electronic ration cards, for instance—the culture, language, and cuisine are foreign to most Syrians. Many Syrians have family across the border in either Lebanon or Jordan, which is why they mostly flee westward or eastward rather than northward. Lebanon is perceived to be a more dangerous place for refugees—there are no official camps for Syrians—so Jordan or Iraq are the preferred destinations for most Syrian refugees.

Clabbarri, 83.

Latif.
CONTRIBUTORS

Manolo Abella is an economist and formerly the director of the International Migration Program of the International Labour Office in Geneva. He has been actively involved in international efforts to develop a multilateral framework for the management of labor migration, and spent many years writing and rendering advice to governments on policies and best practices. He is currently helping the University of Oxford's Centre on Migration Policy and Society develop short courses in Asia. These are particularly focused on connecting academic research and labor migration policies, and organizing this knowledge to be utilized in training senior government officials.

Diego Acosta Arcarazo is a lecturer in law at the University of Bristol. His area of expertise is EU migration law. His focus lies in migration law and policies in South America. He has published widely in the area of European Migration Law, including his book The Long-Term Residence Status as a Subsidiary Form of EU Citizenship: An Analysis of Directive 2003/109. He has also co-edited two other books, including EU Justice and Security Law: After Lisbon and Stockholm. His work has appeared among the most important journals in the field including the International Migration Review, European Law Review, European Law Journal, Journal of Common Market Studies and European Journal of Migration and Law. Acosta is also currently working on the Prospects for International Migration Governance Project (MIGPROSP). For more information on this project, see http://migrationgovernance.org.

Lionel Beehner is a PhD candidate in political science at Yale University, where he focuses on the use of force against violent non-state actors. He was a senior staff writer at the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as a term member. He is a member of USA Today's Board of Contributors, and the founding editor of
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Cicero Magazine. His work has appeared in The Atlantic, Foreign Affairs, Slate, and The New Republic, among other publications.

Maxine Burkett is a professor of climate change law and policy and tort law at the William S. Richardson School of Law at the University of Hawaii. She has written extensively in various areas of climate law with a particular focus on climate justice, exploring the disparate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities in the United States and globally. Burkett has presented research on the law and policy of climate change throughout the United States and in West Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean. She has also served as the inaugural director of the Center for Island Climate Adaptation and Policy (ICAP), where she led projects to address climate change policy and planning for island communities globally. She directed the completion of several adaptation-related policy documents, outreach and education programs, and decisionmaker support efforts for Hawaii and other Pacific island nations. Burkett attended Williams College and Exeter College, University of Oxford, and received her law degree from Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley.

Edoardo Campanella is a Eurozone economist at UniCredit Bank and junior fellow at the Aspen Institute Italia. He previously worked for the economic research departments of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the Italian Senate. He has contributed to major policy reports, such as the 2010 World Trade Report published by the WTO and the 2014 Global Competitiveness Report by the WEF. He holds an master of public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where he was a Fulbright scholar. While at Harvard, he was one of the co-chairs of the European Conference, and worked as teaching fellow for former U.S. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers. In spring 2013, he was awarded the Certificate for Teaching Excellence, a university-wide award for the best teachers of the year. Campanella is a frequent commentator in the international press, penning editorials on European economic and political issues, with a focus on intergenerational conflict and 'brain drain'. His writings have appeared in Foreign Affairs, Project Syndicate, and the Financial Times.

Annie Chen is associate program director of the Unaccompanied Children Program at the Vera Institute's Center on Immigration and Justice, a national initiative to increase access to legal information and representation for unaccompanied children facing removal. A lawyer by trade, she practiced in the litigation department of the law firm DLA Piper before joining Vera in January 2013. At