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Artigo de Investigação

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-SPATIAL IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE MODELS ON REFUGEE CAMPS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO CAMPS IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT – Of the 117 million forcibly displaced people globally, 37 million are refugees. A majority of those fleeing persecution, conflict, and human rights violations come from the Middle East, Asia and Africa and are hosted by neighboring low-income countries, often in refugee camps. With average life spans of 17 years and sizes rivalling small cities, refugee camps are governed internally and by host communities according to different policies and implementation models. This paper analyses the organizational structure and socio-spatial aspects of two refugee camps in Jordan, the Al Hussein and Al Zaatari camps. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023, a comparative analysis serves to understand how the governance models applied to each camp shape its future socio-material landscape. The paper also underlines the differences in refugee agencies in the production of what Lefebvre calls 'social space', a dynamically produced outcome of the interplay between social relations, power dynamics, and everyday actions. By assembling the camps' contextual histories, the role of governing policies and practices, and the residents' daily practices, the study traces the importance of self-organization on the camps' social and material landscape. While challenging the perception of camps as top-down planned settlements and reinforcing the critical role of refugee agency, the paper ultimately shows that governance models go a long way in shaping the socio-material landscape that emerges in camps.

Keywords: Refugee camps; socio-spatial development; governance models; spatial policies; Jordan.

RESUMO – COMPREENDER O IMPACTO SOCIOESPACIAL DOS MODELOS DE GOVERNANÇA EM CAMPOS DE REFUGIADOS: ESTUDO COMPARATIVO DE DOIS CAMPOS NA JORDÂNIA. Dos 117 milhões de deslocados à força em todo o mundo, 37 milhões são refugiados. A maioria dos que fogem de perseguições, conflitos e violações dos direitos humanos provém do Médio Oriente, Ásia e África e é acolhida por países vizinhos de baixo rendimento, frequentemente em campos de refugiados. Com uma 'esperança média de vida' de 17 anos e dimensões que rivalizam as de pequenas cidades, estes campos são governados internamente e pelas comunidades de acolhimento de acordo com diferentes políticas e modelos de implementação. Este artigo analisa a estrutura organizacional e alguns aspetos socioespaciais de dois campos de refugiados na Jordânia, os campos de Al Hussein e Al Zaatari. Com base em trabalho de campo etnográfico realizado em 2023, esta análise comparativa procura compreender como é que os modelos de governação de cada campo moldam o seu futuro sociomaterial. O artigo destaca ainda as diferenças na agência dos refugiados na produção daquilo que Lefebvre apelida de "espaço social", um produto construído a partir da interação entre as relações sociais, as dinâmicas de poder e as ações quotidianas. Ao reunir as histórias contextuais dos dois campos, as políticas e práticas de governação e as práticas diárias dos residentes, o artigo demonstra a importância da auto-organização no cenário social e material dos campos. Ao mesmo tempo que desafia a perceção dos campos de refugiados como assentamentos exclusivamente produzidos de cima para baixo, e reforce o papel crucial da atuação dos refugiados, o artigo demonstra, em última análise, que os modelos de governação contribuem significativamente para moldar o cenário sociomaterial que emerge nos campos.

Palavras-chave: Campos de refugiados; desenvolvimento socioespacial; modelos de governança; políticas espaciais; Jordânia.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Analyses socio-spatial aspects of refugee camps through a qualitative research lens.
- Studies the impact of governance models on camp development.
- Discusses spatial organization, social networks, and psychological wellbeing in camps.
- Validates camps as 'assemblages' created from physical, mental, and lived spaces.
- Proposes multi-level governance combining humanitarian and developmental models.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As local, regional and global conflicts persist and lead to new humanitarian emergencies and conflict-related displacement, human inhabitation in refugee camps has been increasingly studied within the field of urbanism (Agier, 2008; Herz, 2012; Sanyal, 2014; Turner, 2016). Camps are now the size of cities, the Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh, for example, houses over one million refugees and continues to grow. These camps are complex spaces with distinctive political, social, cultural, humanitarian and disciplinary underpinnings, often playing a formative role in their residents' migration histories (Stevenson & Sutton, 2011). Although generally described as temporary, ephemeral, transient, city-camps, or semi-permanent, such depictions ignore the micro 'placemaking' processes and socio-spatial phases which lead to the permanence of camps over time (Aburamadan *et al.*, 2020).

Countering simplistic narratives, the increasing acknowledgment of the 'permanent' nature of city-sized camps, some of which merge into their host cities, has revived the debate on urbanism in refugee camps. From an urban agglomeration perspective, refugee camps should thus be studied around the five dimensions of urbanism: governance, infrastructure, society, environment, and economy (Safier, 2004). In this study, we focus in more detail on the sub-dimensions highlighted in figure 1; we believe these target informal, tradition-based, or resource-scarce development approaches in refugee camp-cities. These attributes also play out in 'Tactical Urbanism', a term coined by Mike Lydon in 2011 (Lydon *et al.,* 2011), to describe short-term low-cost action-oriented interventions which may, at times, challenge mainstream top-down planning models (see also, Stevens & Dovey, 2023).

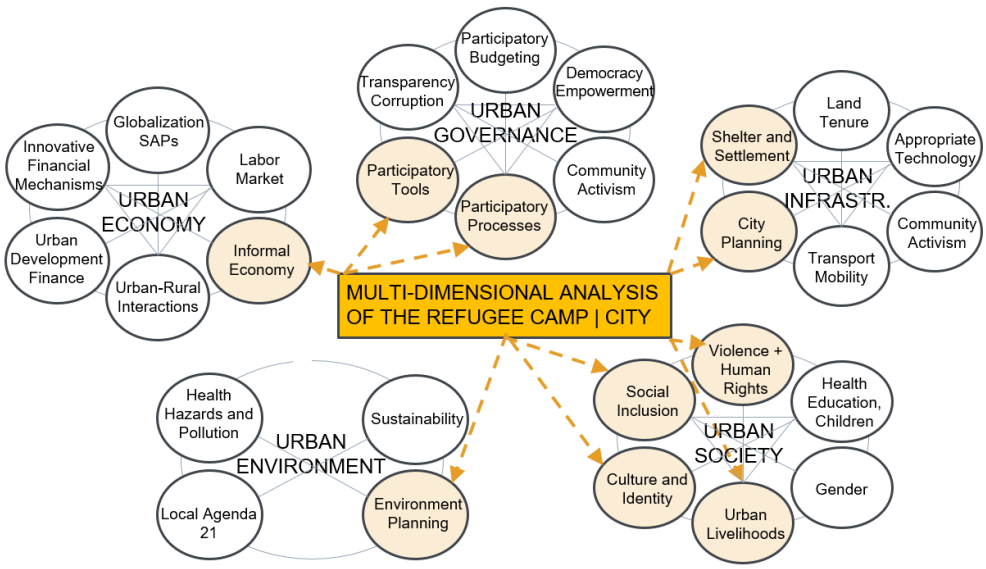

Fig. 1 – Analyzing the refugee camp-city through the five dimensions of urbanism, focusing on the highlighted sub-dimensions.

Fig. 1 – Analisar a cidade-campo de refugiados através das cinco dimensões do urbanismo, com foco nas subdimensões destacadas.

Source: Adapted from Safier (2004)

In addition to the five dimensions, and in a way linking them, we focus on the governance of refugee camps. Urban governance can be considered as a collection of different work arrangements, including formal and informal government actions, to collectively guide the development of cities (Hendriks, 2014). From the 1980s to the late 1990s, urban governance has transitioned from the traditional government governance model to the governance network model (Stoker, 1998), and more recently, has entered the stage of multi-subject participation, with social participation, urban democracy, social innovation, smart city and sustainable development becoming major issues (Song *et al.*, 2023).

Specifically, regarding the governance of camp-cities, AbouAssi *et al*. (2025) have recently identified six areas through which to address systemic, participatory, spatial, and social dynamics. Those six areas are:

1) Law, Policy, and Management;
2) Camp Typologies;
3) Camp Life Cycles;
4) Organizational Ecosystems;

5) Intersectionality and Identity;
6) Refugee Agency, Voice, and Mobilization.

Drawing from AbouAssi *et al.* (2025) as well as McFarlane (2011), we examine the governance models of refugee camps as complex social systems or assemblages of policies and practices. Assemblage theory offers a useful framework for understanding refugee camps not as static humanitarian containers, but as dynamic socio-material formations produced through ongoing interactions among refugees, humanitarian agencies, state actors, infrastructures, technologies, and everyday spatial practices.

Our case studies are in Jordan, a nation with a longstanding history of hosting refugee camps which over time have emerged as urban environments shaped through negotiations between institutional governance and refugee agency. The theory is especially valuable because it foregrounds the socio-material dimensions of camp life. Governance is not exercised solely through formal policies or humanitarian actors; rather, it is distributed across material infrastructures, spatial layouts, technologies, informal economies, and embodied daily practices. These interact in unstable and evolving ways, producing forms of order that transcend institutional planning.

This study examines the assemblage processes in the transformation of two disparate camps in Jordan, the Al Hussein camp in Amman and the Al Zaatari camp in the north of the country. It does so by connecting contextual histories, multi-level and multi-actor governance policies and practices, and illustrations from the authors' ethnographic research in 2023. It identifies key socio-spatial and governance elements that can shift the discourse from containment to empowerment and reframe the camps as dynamic sites of socio-spatial production, where governance, agency, and materiality are mutually constitutive.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework on the governance of refugee camps, their self-organization and social dynamics. This is followed by a methodological section describing the tasks we carried out to capture the residents' experience of camp governance models. Third, we present our case studies, with an emphasis on aspects related to governance and spatial policies, which in turn help explain each camp's development and transformation. Finally, we conclude by pointing out that future positive transformation of these camps can be achieved if multilevel governance integrates the strengths of tactical urbanism and its bottom-up community-driven actions with those of strategic urbanism and its top-down, regulated planning processes.

2. THE GOVERNANCE OF REFUGEE CAMPS: FROM SHORT-TERM SURVIVAL TO PERMANENCE

The literature discussing refugee camps analyses how governance structures profoundly shape the physical and social landscapes of refugee and migration-driven settlements (Al-Homoud & Samarah, 2025; Dempsey & Bose, 2025; Papademetriou *et al.*, 2017).

Although designed as temporary responses to displacement, refugee camps often evolve into enduring urban communities (Sanyal, 2014) with average lifespans ranging from 15 to almost 24 years (Dantas *et al.,* 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). Despite this, they are typically framed as 'temporary', as that avoids the legitimization of the camps in the host nation and city. In most cases, camps established because of conflict and mass displacement are positioned as temporary informal cities, with their own discrete organizations of everyday life, social processes, and systems of power (Agier, 2002, 2008). As these hybrid camps transform and mutate, governance models influence both their spatial configurations and the social interactions within them.

In addition, the evolution of these camps is a complex combination of external and internal factors, and power relations between governing entities and camp residents determine the degree of agency and autonomy that refugees experience in their everyday lives, with direct implications for their well-being (Turner, 2016).

As such, the socio-spatial governance of refugee camps refers to how refugees are governed and how it affects their organization within space, encompassing camp layout and infrastructure provision, such as ration distribution patterns and social interactions. As Agier (2011) notes, the spatial arrangement of refugee camps is often a *rappel à l'ordre*, literally translated as "call to order", reproducing wider socio-territorial hierarchies and eviction politics on which host states rely.

Sanyal (2014) expands on this, arguing that camps are not just spaces of exclusion but also sites of urbanization and negotiation of identities. Our article analyses camp space following, first, Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of space as socially produced through the interaction of the physical, the mental, and the lived. Second, it draws on Low's (2016) reformulation of Giddens' (1984) concept of 'duality', in which

space is understood as a duality of action and structure –encompassing both the structural constraints imposed on refugees and their agency in reconstructing their lives and environments.

Third, it draws on assemblage theory (McFarlane, 2011) to make explicit that camp life is both an assemblage of human and non-human agents playing out in a confined environment (tents becoming bricks-and-mortar dwellings through individual human effort, makeshift infrastructure that is slowly upgraded individually as well as collectively and turned definitive, and so on) and an assemblage of social norms and policies that coalesce into each camp's overall governance.

We then follow Lombard's (2014) analytical strategy of looking at everyday practices in urban areas to understand urban life in general, and Krause & Schmidt's (2020) emphasis on the need to recognize refugees' agency in shaping their own spaces and challenging the crisis of representation in refugee studies.

By examining the socio-spatial evolution of refugee camps through an urban life lens, we conceptualize these sites not as static humanitarian anomalies but as dynamic environments governed by the same underlying logic as traditional cities. By borrowing from established literature on alternative urbanism and the manifold complexities of self-organizing systems, we analyse how these 'temporary' settlements develop the infrastructure, social hierarchies, and economic networks characteristic of permanent urban centres.

2.1. Three governance models

Studies have shown that three models of governance, or a combination thereof, generally apply within the confines of refugee camps: i) humanitarian governance (HG); ii) developmental governance (DG), and iii) militarized governance (MG). The HG model, often established in the immediate aftermath of displacement, focuses on providing short-term survival needs, including food, shelter, and health services, and typically offers little autonomy to refugee communities.

Barnett (2005, 2013) argues that by considering refugees exclusively as recipients of assistance, incapable of acting on their own behalf, the model reproduces power asymmetries. In controlling resources, food, movement, and space, it forces refugees into a state of dependency and strict conformity, where individual choices are limited and accountability is directed toward donors rather than residents. Turner (2016) reiterates that such humanitarian spaces constrained by regulation provide limited opportunities for self-organization.

The DG model links the strengthening of institutions to the improvement of human development, ensuring that progress is equitable and sustainable. A state-led approach to administration focused on driving economic growth and enhancing social welfare requires substantial investment and coordination among various stakeholders such as local governments, international organizations, and civil society actors. However, Betts and Collier (2017a, 2017b) note that despite aiming for integration, this approach may reinforce existing social hierarchies among different nationalities, raising critical questions about equity and inclusivity.

The factors range from framing integration as a process focused on immigrants adapting to the "host society", and policies that inadvertently favor certain groups due to pre-existing power dynamics, to centralized *versus* localized approaches. The model's priorities on self-reliance and job creation may favor refugees with higher human capital (skill, education, or capital). Job opportunities tailored to specific locations may also create uneven advantages based on nationality, as not all refugee groups in a camp may have equal access to or training for the jobs created in those specific zones. This can also lead to market inequality by fostering low-wage exploitation for vulnerable groups which cannot compete in new capacity-building models.

The repressive MG model focusses heavily on security, regulation, and confinement, leading to restricted mobility and access to essential resources, which can intensify trauma and social segregation both within the camp and beyond its boundaries (Fassin, 2011). This form of socio-spatial governance and territorialization has profound implications for the lived experiences and psychological well-being of camp residents, producing environments marked by constant surveillance and pervasive anxiety.

By leaning on these models and theories, this paper's objective is twofold: a) to investigate how these two camps are continuously shaped through lived experience, representation, and social relations, and b) to understand these camps as dynamic and evolving socio-material assemblages in which governance, agency, material infrastructures, and informal practices interact to produce contingent forms of urbanity, power, and belonging.

3. METHODOLOGY: TRACING THE GOVERNANCE EFFECT IN RESIDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Using a structured inductive approach, we developed a qualitative coding framework for the 21 interviews we carried out during fieldwork in November 2023. These included 13 interviews with camp residents and 8 with camp or government officials. The 13 residents included 5 women and 4 men in Al Hussein and 3 women and 1 man in Al Zaatari. The officials we interviewed worked for the United Nations Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA), the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD), DPA and SRAD are Jordanian government entities jointly managing the camps' operations, the former in Al Hussein with UNRWA and the latter in Al Zaatari with UNHCR.

Our strategy to select resident interviewees included stratified sampling by location (participants from different areas of the camp), gender (a balanced mix of men and women), and age groups, the latter instrumental in understanding social hierarchies and political input based on history and lived experiences. Choosing depth over breadth allowed research to focus on specific camp dynamics, social relationships, and spatial processes in different zones of the camp or regarding people's different stages of displacement.

The inductive approach allowed analytical themes to emerge organically from the data, while also integrating deductive categories informed by theoretical constructs. We utilized Bryman's (2012) phenomenological approach to social research by questioning how the camp residents made sense of the world around them.

We then identified similarities and differences, repetition of keywords, and descriptions of feelings, among other aspects. We organized the initial descriptive coding, thematic analysis, and pattern coding, and then synthesized the data to extract key themes and patterns around socio-spatial development. For example, one question for camp residents from our questionnaire was, "Can you describe how families choose where to settle in the camp?" The responses to this question varied significantly. One was:

> When we arrived, we looked for a place close to others from our village. It makes us feel safer. Also, being near to the market is important because we need to buy food daily and don't have transportation. (Refugee, Al Hussein camp)

while another was:

> We didn't have a choice. Our locations were assigned by UNHCR / UNRWA based on availability. (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp)

A third response was:

> Before, at the beginning of the Syrian war, we couldn't choose where to stay because of the huge influx of people in a short period of time. But following incidents of late-night assaults on girls during visits to outdoor restrooms, the camp management started locating families beside each other and started to ask new refugee families if they wished to live beside their relatives or extended families. (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp)

In this case, and as table I indicates, we assigned specific codes for each type of response. 'Looking for a place close to others from our village' was assigned a 'social networks' code and a description indicating a preference for settling near known community members for support and safety.

The 'safer' comment was coded under 'security concerns' with safety as a determining factor in settlement choice. Being near the market earned the 'proximity to services' code while underlining the importance of accessibility to essential services like markets. Not having a choice in location or having to move further away for space implied minimal trade-offs in balancing convenience against factors like crowding.

The third response was coded under 'security concerns', lack of choice in location', and 'social networks.' The initial coding led to second-cycle coding around categories such as settlement patterns, access to resources, and spatial constraints. Categorizing, in turn, identified key development themes, which are discussed in Section 5.

Table I – Interview coding.

Quadro I – Codificação da entrevista.

First-Cycle Code	Description	Second-Cycle Category	Key Development Theme
Social Networks	Preference for settling near known community members for support and safety	Settlement Patterns	Community-Based Location Choice
Security Concerns	Safety as a determining factor in choosing where to live	Spatial Constraints	Security and Stability
Proximity to Services	Importance of being near essential services like markets	Access to Resources	Service Accessibility
Lack of Choice in Location	Respondents indicating no agency in selecting their settlement location	Spatial Constraints	Forced Settlement / Displacement
Trade-offs for Space	Moving further from preferred areas to gain space	Settlement Patterns	Space *vs*. Convenience

Source:Authors

4. THE JABAL AL HUSSEIN AND AL ZAATARI REFUGEE CAMPS

4.1. The Al Hussein Refugee Camp, Amman (1952-present): the long-standing quasi city

Al Hussein is one of the first four 'Nakba' camps established in Jordan in 1952 to house refugees displaced from Palestine in 1948. It was initially organized around a grid plan with 50 subsidiary streets feeding into Ain Jalout Street, its primary thoroughfare, to house 8 000 refugees in an area of 0.42km^2 about 3km from the center of Amman (UNRWA, 2012) (fig. 2). Since then, the camp has transformed itself into a bustling urban community of about 34 000 registered Palestinian refugees occupying over 1km^2 (along with another 20 000 residing outside the camp).

It receives primary support from the UNRWA and the Jordanian government through the DPA. The DPA is responsible for the camp's security, infrastructure, and retail establishments, while UNRWA manages education, health, and social services. Nonetheless, the camp struggles with substandard living and health conditions, deteriorating shelters, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of facilities. Approximately 28% of camp residents earn an income below the national poverty line, 20% of residents over the age of 15 are illiterate, and 70% of residents lack any form of health insurance (UNRWA, 2023).

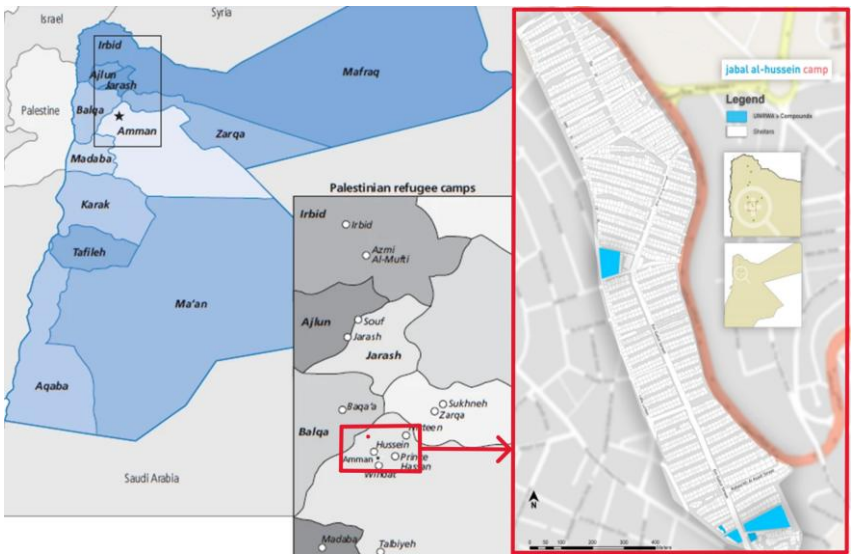

Fig. 2 – Al Hussein refugee camp.

Fig. 2 – Campo de refugiados de Al Hussein.

Source: UNRWA (2023)

4.1.1. Governance and Spatial Policies

Since the 1950s, Jordan's policy towards Palestinians and the Palestinian refugee crisis has had a profound and multifaceted impact on how refugee communities were managed, spatially organized, and politically integrated within the Jordanian state. Jordan1948 full citizenship to most Palestinian refugees after

the 1948 Nakba, allowing refugees to settle, work and move freely and enabling the DPA and city authorities to invest in infrastructure. Refugees were not entirely excluded from national economic and political systems; instead, they participated in labour markets, public institutions, and urban life. The developmental trajectory also encouraged gradual physical consolidation of the camp. Temporary shelters were replaced by concrete housing, roads were improved, utility systems expanded, and public services institutionalized. The camp became increasingly connected to the wider metropolitan economy through transportation networks, employment opportunities, schools, and commercial activities (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – Left: Refugee camp in Amman after the second 'Nakba', 1950; Right: Al Hussein Camp, 1981.
Fig. 3 – Esquerda: Campo de refugiados em Amã após a segunda 'Nakba', 1950; Direita: Campo de Al Hussein, 1981.
Source: UNRWA, 2023

Various civil and political organizations, rooted in the camp's history and location in Amman, have shaped the region's socio-spatial landscape. The establishment of the Urban Development Department (UDD) with the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) in 1980 followed by the formation of the DPA to support UNRWA efforts led to increased collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations. Over the next three decades, the reconstruction effort has been operating through a form of 'managed informality' that straddles the urbanization process and the political undertones in play in Al Hussein. While authorities tolerated many forms of informal construction and commercial activity, they simultaneously imposed limits on political mobilization and autonomous governance structures for residents and camp authorities.

> We may not be strict about addressing building violations, but we are neutral and non-political when it comes to the services we run, like schools, health centers, and administrative offices. It is important to be neutral for effective delivery of services during peace and conflict. We are prohibited from participating in political activities, or being a member of any group, but the conflict now makes it difficult because of the strong personal views and convictions everyone has. The public spaces inside the camps fall under Jordanian state sovereignty, and the government, through the DPA, enforces security, political policing, and municipal oversight. (UNRWA officer, translated)

This balancing strategy allowed the camp to function as a socially stable and economically productive urban district without fully dissolving its refugee status. The camp thus remained politically exceptional even as it became spatially integrated into Amman. Governance therefore involved both inclusion and containment: refugees were incorporated into the national urban system while their refugee identity remained institutionally reproduced through UNRWA administration and camp designation.

4.1.2. Development and Transformation

State policies and humanitarian interventions created the camp's formal spatial framework, but refugees themselves continuously reshaped that framework through daily practices of inhabitation, commerce, kinship, and cultural reproduction. Among them are acts of "spatial violation", which Maqusi (2021) argues are the favored form of resident agency in Palestinian camps in Jordan and Lebanon. These acts related to political resistance, urban informality, physical infrastructure and safety may be illegal, but

they attempt to negotiate the "forbidden zone", producing a new identity for marginalized communities and the re-scaling of space from 'relief' to 'personal'. space.

The resulting urban form, continuously assembled through everyday acts of inhabitation and adaptive social organization, is visible throughout the camp. Originally organized on a 10x10 meter grid, the camp provided each family with a tent. Over decades, as the refugee population increased, the camp grew, with dense, traditional, and vernacular forms associated with pre-1948 multigenerational Palestinian village life. Residents built brick and concrete rooms, evolving into multistorey inward-facing courtyard-based structures with *attabat*, meaning 'doorsteps', to reflect the principles of *batin* (interior) and *zahir* (exterior) inherent to Arab-Islamic urbanism (Hakim, 2013). Courtyards, rooftop spaces, and narrow alleyways became semi-private communal areas where social interaction, childcare, food preparation, and family gatherings could occur. Residents also used symbolic and memorial practices to embed Palestinian identity into the camp landscape. Murals, flags, commemorative posters on intentionally unfinished concrete walls, and the naming of streets or businesses after Palestinian villages and cities have created a geography of remembrance within the camp. These symbolic spatial practices connected everyday life in East Amman to an aspirational homeland and maintained political consciousness across generations. Public and semi-public spaces therefore became sites where national identity was materially and visually reproduced.

The convergence of agencies, systems, infrastructures, legal ambiguities, social networks, informal economies, and material adaptations in Al Hussein is evidence of a dynamic socio-material assemblage (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – Socio-spatial adaptations in Al Hussein camp: a product of and an agent for social construction.

Fig. 4 – Adaptações socioespaciais através de práticas quotidianas no campo de Al Hussein: um produto e um agente de construção social.

Source: Authors

Commercial activity, originating from the influx of former Palestinian artisans from Kuwait in the 1980s, have also reshaped the camp's spatial structure. Over time, residents began converting ground floors of homes and alley-facing rooms into small grocery stores, bakeries, repair shops, and street-facing businesses. Informal market streets emerged organically along routes with high pedestrian circulation,

creating localized economic corridors that simultaneously functioned as social meeting spaces. Economic survival was therefore embedded within the camp's social fabric rather than separated into formally zoned commercial districts. These market areas became important spaces for sustaining community networks and reproducing Palestinian cultural practices through food, language, and social exchange.

> Building with concrete and opening a business or shop inside the camp isn't about giving up the Right of Return – it's about surviving with respect and a means of livelihood. My father, his friends, and other refugees turned temporary shelters into a living city with their own hands. (Refugee, Al Hussein Camp)

Similarly, religious institutions continue to play a central role in spatial adaptation. Mosques and adjacent gathering areas have evolved into more than places of worship; they function as centres for dispute resolution, education, charity distribution, and communal organization. During religious holidays such as Ramadan and Eid, streets and communal areas are temporarily reconfigured for collective meals, prayer gatherings, and public celebrations, reinforcing both social cohesion and cultural continuity.

From a Lefebvrian perspective, these adaptations illustrate how social space is actively produced through lived practices rather than merely imposed through planning. The camp's physical environment became a manifestation of social relations, memory, and identity. From an assemblage viewpoint, the transformation can be understood as the outcome of ongoing interactions among refugees, infrastructures, humanitarian constraints, economic practices, religious institutions, and political memory. The resulting urban form is therefore neither entirely planned nor entirely informal but continuously assembled through everyday acts of inhabitation and adaptation.

The transformation was also supported by the planning initiatives of GAM when it first incorporated refugee camps into the broader urban expansion of East Amman in its 1987 Master Plan (fig. 5). Although Al Hussein retained its formal designation as a Palestinian refugee camp administered in partnership with UNRWA, GAM's metropolitan planning strategies increasingly treated the camp as part of the city's functional urban fabric. This process reshaped infrastructure provision, circulation networks, land use patterns, and the camp's relationship to surrounding neighbourhoods. Major arterial roads developed around the camp connected it to central Amman and adjacent working-class districts, facilitating mobility for residents seeking employment and services outside the camp. At the same time, these transportation linkages stimulated commercial growth within the camp itself. Informal businesses and market corridors emerged along high-traffic routes, transforming sections of the camp into economically active urban spaces.

> Over the years the camp expanded outside its initial perimeter in all directions, which changed its position in the city: from a peripheral entity that housed refugees to a central space within Jabal al-Al Hussein and the city. (UNRWA, 2012)

However, the relationship between municipal planning and camp development remained uneven and partial. Because refugee camps occupied a politically exceptional status, they were often excluded from comprehensive urban redevelopment schemes and formal zoning regulations. The incremental infrastructure upgrades coupled with the camp's informal resident-led adaptation created urban challenges: chronic overcrowding, aging infrastructure, limited public space, and pressure on water and sanitation systems. With its 2008 Master Plan, GAM has changed its approach by concurrently planning at the regional and community scales (fig. 6). On the regional planning scale, it introduced unique housing zones for refugees and public housing and supplemented them at the community planning scale with an approach promoting active citizen participation.

This local rehabilitation strategy effectively engaged vulnerable populations of Amman's refugee camps and informal settlements, such as Al Hussein and Mohammad Amin Camp, in planning efforts (Alshafei, 2025). As the 2008 Plan and Alshafei's study of the Mohammad Amin Camp document, the bottom-up participatory approach focused on urban acupuncture and local needs by targeting small-scale interventions, decentralization and empowerment, by shifting power to lower levels (Joint Working Groups through community networks, Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs], and municipal officials), community-led upgrading with residents identifying potential improvements, youth and social engagement through technology, and encouraging youth participation in urban policy (Zeadat, 2023). Firas Square, a major intersection about 1km from the camp, is a recognizable landmark and one outcome among many of this long-term multi-pronged approach (fig. 7).

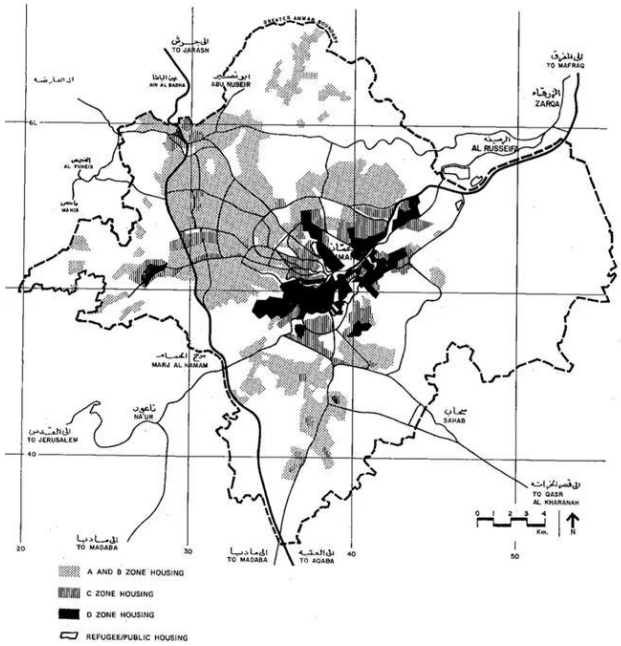

Fig. 5 – Greater Amman's 1987 Master Plan incorporated refugee camps for the first time.

Fig. 5 – O Plano Diretor da Grande Amã de 1987 incorporou pela primeira vez campos de refugiados.

Source: Municipality of Greater Amman and Dar al-Handasah Consultants (Shair & Partners) (1988)

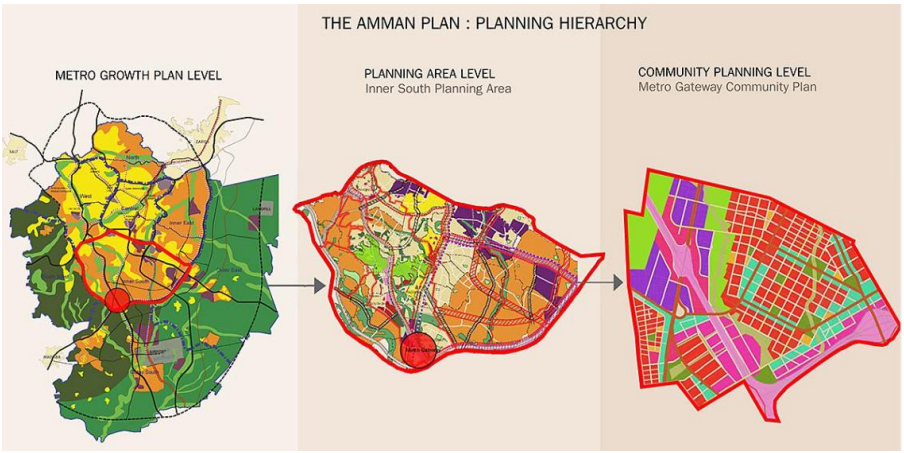

Fig. 6 – The 2008 Amman Plan, with concurrent planning at three scales.

Fig. 6 – O Plano de Amã de 2008, com planeamento simultâneo em três escalas.

Source: Greater Amman Municipality (2008)



Fig. 7 – Street view of Firas Square, a major intersection 1km away from the Al Hussein Camp.

Fig. 7 – Vista da rua da Praça Firas, um cruzamento importante a 1km do campo Al Hussein.

Source: Google Maps (2025)

4.2. The Al Zaatari Refugee Camp (2012 – present): the transition from securitized humanitarian governance to developmental governance.

Al Zaatari (UNHCR, 2021) was established in 2012 in northeast Jordan and is home to 80 000 people at last count. It is the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world and a symbol of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. Jordan's response to the crisis was twofold: implementing policies and decisions that resulted in encampment, and managing these 'promoted' settlements. The initial decision was to create the government's SRAD department and partner it with UNHCR. SRAD's geo-policy fostered the empowerment and funding of aid programs to operate exclusively within the camp, imposing security, movement, and administrative restrictions on residents until the introduction of The Jordan Compact in 2016 (Awamleh & Doraï, 2023). The restrictions, imposed by SRAD to maintain camp control and manage the population, included severe limits on freedom of movement outside the camp, required registration through service cards issued by the Ministry of Interior, and asset control to prevent the removal or sale of aid-provided caravans / housing units.

The camp is divided into 12 districts covering an area of 5km^2, and essential service infrastructure includes 11 schools, two hospitals, 10 healthcare centers including a dedicated maternity unit, two supermarkets, waste-water treatment plant, and 27 community centers that provide psychosocial support and recreational activities (UNCHR, 2016a) (Fig. 8). Under the UNHCR's supervision, over 30 UN agencies and NGOs employ between 1,200 and 1,300 staff to provide these services, except for the schools which are operated by the Jordanian Ministry of Education. In addition, about 6,500 refugees also benefit from cash-for-work opportunities, while the camp also features an informal market of 3,000 shops and businesses operated by refugees. UNHCR also distributes quarterly cash assistance to refugees via a 'mobile wallet,' allowing them to make digital payments.



Fig. 8 – Infrastructure plan: Al Zaatari camp.

Fig. 8 – Planta de infraestruturas: campo de Al Zaatari.

Source: UNHCR (2017) (accessed on 12/8/2025)

4.2.1. Governance and Spatial Policies

From the camp's establishment in 2012 until the formal launch of The Jordan Compact in 2016, governance in Al Zaatari largely focused on emergency management, security, and humanitarian service delivery administered jointly by the Jordanian state, particularly SRAD, and UNHCR. The camp operated through highly centralized governance structures emphasizing control, aid distribution, and spatial regulation

based on the Jordan Response Plan's (JRP) approach to address short-term people-centered needs (UNDP, 2015).

However, as the camp evolved into a semi-permanent urban environment with markets, informal economies, and refugee-led neighbourhood organization, this top-down humanitarian model became increasingly difficult to sustain (Simpson & Sullivan, 2016).

The Jordan Compact, a formal agreement between the Jordanian government, international donors, and humanitarian institutions, was launched with the objective of transforming the refugee response from temporary aid dependency into a model centred on economic integration, labour participation, and infrastructural development. It altered the governance logic by reframing the Syrian refugees as potential economic actors rather than solely humanitarian beneficiaries. The agreement linked international financial assistance and trade concessions for Jordan to policies promoting refugee employment and self-reliance. Within Al Zaatari, this led to the expansion of "cash-for-work" programs, vocational training initiatives, small business activities, and regulated labour participation. With pledges of $700 million in grants annually and concessional loans of almost $2 billion in partnership with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the the World Bank's Program for Results / P4R (World Bank, 2024), it allowed Jordan to issue 200 000 work permits and formal labour market access for the Syrian refugees (Barbalet *et al.,* 2018). Refugees increasingly became integrated into governance through labour systems and market-based mechanisms rather than only through aid dependency (Almasri, 2021).

This shift significantly affected the spatial and infrastructural governance of the camp. Humanitarian agencies and Jordanian authorities began investing in longer-term infrastructure projects rather than temporary emergency facilities. Camp restructuring initiatives introduced more formalized neighbourhood divisions, improved road systems, upgraded sanitation infrastructure, electrical networks, and more organized service coordination systems. The 2016 restructuring projects sought to stabilize the camp's urban form while accommodating the reality of long-term settlement (UNHCR, 2016b).

The Compact also encouraged forms of participatory and co-produced governance. Camp authorities increasingly engaged refugee community leaders, local committees, and informal neighbourhood representatives in dispute resolution, infrastructure maintenance, and service coordination. Earlier tensions between formal humanitarian governance and informal refugee-led systems gradually evolved into more collaborative arrangements. Scholars have described this process as "coproduction," where governance emerged through interactions between institutional authorities and refugee residents themselves (Simpson & Sullivan, 2016).

Economically, the Compact accelerated the transformation of Al Zaatari into a hybrid refugee-city assemblage. Informal commercial corridors expanded, internal markets became more institutionalized, and refugees gained greater mobility through work permits and labour access outside the camp. These developments reduced some dependence on humanitarian aid while increasing the role of market forces within camp governance. As a result, governance became increasingly dispersed across humanitarian agencies, Jordanian ministries, donor organizations, NGOs, labour systems, and refugee entrepreneurs. Key coordination mechanisms on the ground included:

a) Camp Management & Leadership, where UNCHR leads overall strategic coordination while SRAD oversees security & administration;
b) Sector Working Groups, where specialized working groups coordinate efforts in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Protection, Health, Shelter, and Education;
c) Participatory Approach, where community centres managed by the residents foster self-reliance by focusing on youth and skills training;
d) Digital & Infrastructure Support, where biometric systems are used for cash-based food assistance, and a 300 km water network and a solar plant is managed by UNCHR;
e) Livelihoods & Employment, where The Al Zaatari Office of Employment, facilitates work permits and connects refugees with jobs;
f) Urban Evolution, in how the camp has shifted from tents to prefabricated shelters.

However, the termination of the Compact in 2024 has drastically reduced opportunities, with only 4% of refugees holding work permits, a number expected to decline further. Work permit renewal fees have surged from $14 to $700, increasing the financial burden on the refugees (Fawaz *et al.*, 2024). Interviews revealed dissatisfaction among Syrian workers, highlighting that the camp functions as an emergency setup lacking a long-term vision.

> We are living off aid all the time; we get cash assistance from agencies and the government but no employment. In addition to the struggle to survive, we women also have the pressure

> of growing our family and having children. Things might have been different if we were back in Syria (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp).

4.2.2. Development and Transformation

Al Zaatari was initially designed as a gridded, secure humanitarian facility when it opened in 2012, but in the absence of internal oversight from Jordanian authorities, it underwent a significant transformation until mid-2013 as residents reshaped its layout to meet their social, cultural, and territorial needs. Figure 9 illustrates how the camp's morphology began to replicate Syrian settlement patterns (see Shami, 1993) – clustering shelters around courtyards and mosques - until the UNHCR implemented a structured plan for future refugees. This resulted in the growth from 5 000 shelters over 216ha to over 28 000 shelters over 531ha between 2012 and 2013, with the camp reorganized into 12 neighborhoods and tents replaced by static caravans and prefabricated shelters. Camp administration became decentralized between SRAD and UNHCR for better control (fig. 9).

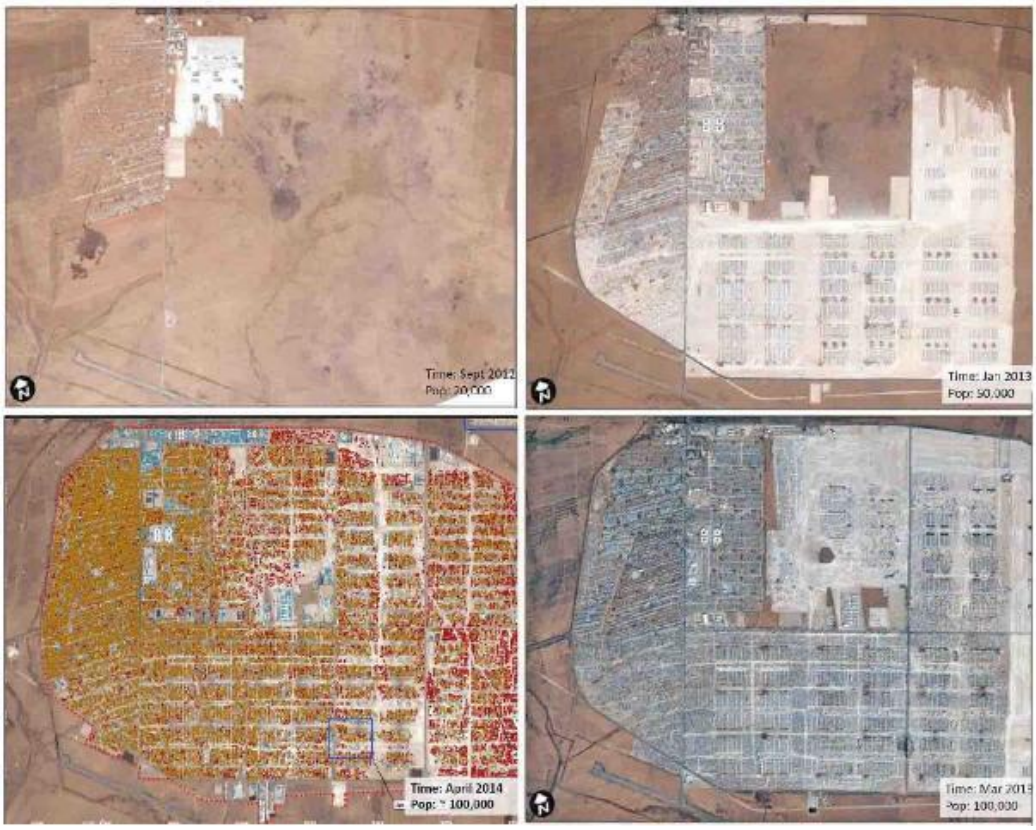

Fig. 9 – Clockwise from top left: Al Zaatari in September 2012, January 2013, March 2013, and April 2014.

Fig. 9 – No sentido dos ponteiros do relógio a partir do canto superior esquerdo: Al Zaatari em setembro de 2012, janeiro de 2013, março de 2013 e abril de 2014.

Source: Al-Homoud & Samarah (2025)

At the housing level, the shift from grid-based uniformity to clustered neighborhoods prioritizing privacy, security, and social cohesion reiterates the socio-cultural core values around which residents shaped their urban spaces. One of the clearest examples is the reorganization of shelters around kinship and tribal relationships. Humanitarian planners originally arranged tents and caravans according to logistical efficiency and aid distribution requirements. However, residents frequently relocated caravans to cluster extended families and village-based communities together. These clusters recreated forms of neighbourhood organization common in Syrian towns and rural settlements, allowing residents to maintain social support networks, collective childcare practices, and customary systems of reciprocity. Caravans were often arranged around shared courtyards or semi-private communal spaces that functioned as gathering areas for meals, conversation, and family interaction, mirroring traditional Syrian domestic spatial patterns. These adaptations echo the traditional urban character of Arab-Islamic cities (Al-Homoud, 2003) (fig.10).

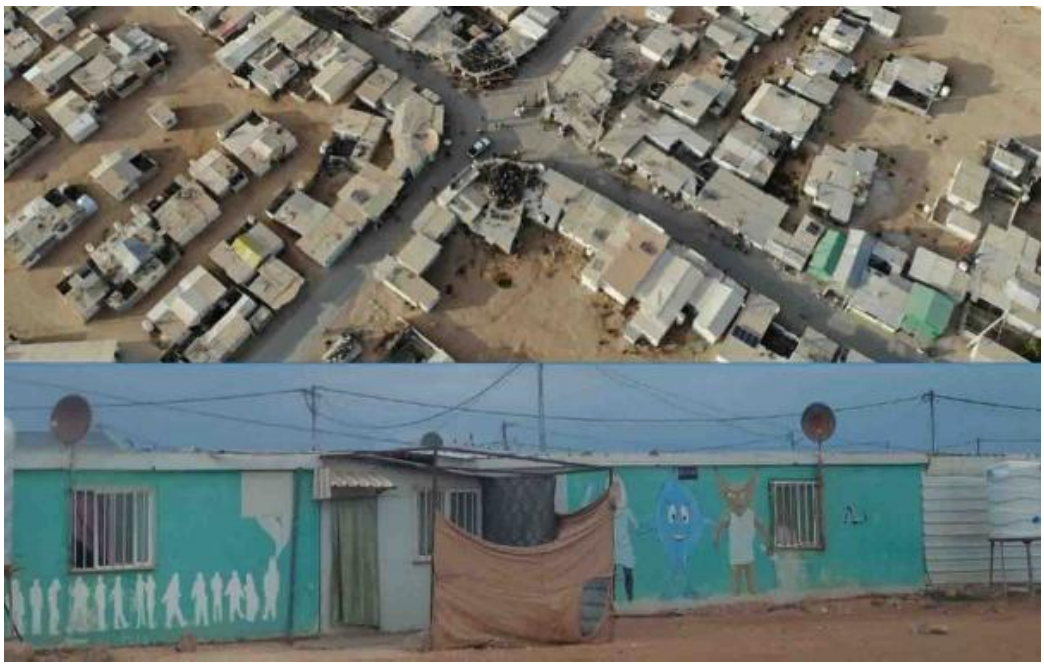

Fig. 10 – Typical inward-facing housing units, with entry elements like fabric barriers or tents, create organic layouts.

Fig. 10 – As típicas unidades habitacionais viradas para o interior, com elementos de entrada como barreiras de tecido ou tendas, criam layouts orgânicos.

Source: UNHCR (2025) and authors

However, it is important to note that the reorganization was subject to certain limitations related to use of 'durable' building materials (Dalal, 2022; Ledwith, 2014). During an interview with a camp director, he stated:

> Camp rules are informed by security concerns. Residents cannot plant trees. We don't allow materials such as cement or concrete blocks, and regulations prohibit us from letting building or construction equipment enter the camp. We have an adequate number of caravans to shelter the entire population. (Officer, Al Zaatari camp)

The restrictions remain in effect to ensure that the camp remains a temporary humanitarian settlement rather than a permanent urban fixture, reflecting broader host-state security and geopolitical considerations. Despite official restrictions, the camp continues to undergo urbanization on account of certain permitted upgrades and selective enforcement. UNHCR and camp authorities permit semi-permanent, non-concrete structural upgrades, such as assembling prefabricated caravans, connecting prefabricated modular extensions, or applying gravel/crushed stone bases for drainage. It now features urban characteristics typical of semi-permanence: retail streets, multiple mosques, schools, medical facilities, dense neighborhoods, electrical grids, customized shelters, a new play field, and community centers. Modular caravan clusters were joined side-by-side and the internal walls of the caravans dismantled to open up expansive prayer halls and create small mosques.

Larger mosques feature extended roofs and walls constructed from corrugated sheet metal over lightweight metal framing. Formal humanitarian facilities, such as hospitals and schools run by UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), or partner NGOs, use large pre-engineered modular structures, container units, or heavy-duty prefabricated panels. To bypass the prohibition on concrete, community centers have been built using rammed earth and gravel-filled sandbags reinforced with wire. Instead of poured concrete slabs, streets and communal spaces rely on packed gravel, crushed stone, or thin asphalt layering for road surfacing and dust mitigation. A solar power plant established in 2017 provides green energy and extended electricity. UNHCR, with donors and tech companies, runs trade schools, hydroponic classes, and robotics labs.

To summarize, the camp's transformation has thus been a result of an ongoing negotiation between refugee agency and institutional governance, with the latter gradually adapting to refugee demands and practices. Infrastructure upgrades, neighbourhood restructuring, electricity systems, market regulation, and community participation initiatives increasingly reflected patterns already established informally by residents. The emergence of the "Shams-Élysées" market corridor is a strong example: rather than

eliminating the informal economy, authorities eventually tolerated and partially regulated it because it had become central to camp life and self-reliance (fig. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11 – Al Zaatari's Al-Yasmeen Street: main commercial spine nicknamed 'Shams Elysees'.

Fig. 11 – Rua Al-Yasmeen de Al Zaatari: principal eixo comercial apelidado de 'Shams Elysees'.

Source: Authors



Fig. 12 – Labs teach robotics, Computer Aided Design (CAD), and hydroponics. New play field hosts soccer events and social/cultural events.

Fig. 12 – Os laboratórios ensinam robótica, Desenho Assistido por Computador, e hidroponia. O novo campo de jogos acolhe eventos de futebol e atividades sociais/culturais.

Source: Authors

The introduction of development-oriented policies under frameworks such as the Jordan Compact further institutionalized this shift. Camp governance moved away from a purely emergency humanitarian model toward one emphasizing economic participation, infrastructure stabilization, and forms of co-produced governance. Refugee committees and community representatives gained more influence in dispute resolution, service coordination, and neighbourhood management. Refugee agency influenced policy evolution, but within constraints established by the Jordanian state and humanitarian systems.

5. THE IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE MODELS IN THE CAMP-CITY

Analyzing the refugee camp from a governance perspective requires sectional cuts for its complex assemblage of people, institutions, organizations, and environmental conditions to emerge (Ramadan, 2013). In that vein, our research findings may be organized into three aspects of socio-spatial development: spatial organization, social networks, and psychological well-being. The first is associated with patterns of settlement layout, clustering, and mobility. The second focuses on community interactions and support mechanisms, while the last addresses questions of identity and belonging while navigating the complexities of the first two.

5.1. Spatial Organization

The temporary nature of humanitarian governance, the sustainable impact of developmental governance, and the isolationist military governance have all shaped the current structure of these camps. At Al Hussein, creative expansion within the camp, aided by GAM's infrastructure, led to the emergence of a 'spontaneous' neighborhood. Amid humanitarian struggles, place-making is reflected in available spaces for socialization and reflection. Al Hussein and East Amman's growth patterns show temporary housing developing along spontaneous pathways, gaining importance as they expanded. Local creativity has transformed tents into multistory concrete structures, enhancing the idea of 'assemblage' over 70 years. Streets serve as play and retail spaces, with mosques and schools as communal areas, highlighting complex social networks and cultural history. The informal planning of East Amman resulted in a mix of neighborhoods, retail districts, healthcare, and educational institutions, while maintaining the political character of the urban fabric. Firas Square exemplifies developmental governance and blurs the line between camp and city.

In contrast, Al Zaatari's spatial organization reflects a more controlled and temporary logic. Initially structured through formal humanitarian master planning, the camp evolved with minimal resident agency in its early years. However, as humanitarian support became more fragmented and protracted, residents began reshaping the space, especially along kinship and economic lines, which tend to intersect.

> We live privately and spend our time with our extended families and friends only. Either we invite them to our caravan or go to theirs. If the weather is nice, we meet outside our caravans in our little private space since we live very close to each other. We need privacy because everyone is always trying to know what's going on. (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp)

5.2. Social Networks

As the development and transformation story indicates, social networks have played a central role in shaping the socio-spatial development of both camps by influencing how refugees organized space, accessed resources, reproduced cultural practices, and negotiated governance structures within their boundaries.

Although humanitarian agencies initially designed Al Zaatari according to standardized emergency planning principles, the camp's actual urban form evolved largely through the operation of kinship ties, tribal affiliations, village-based solidarities, religious networks, and informal economic relationships among Syrian refugees themselves. The clustering of refugees according to pre-existing kinship and regional affiliations was one of the most significant influences on the camp's spatial development. In conjunction with the economic, religious, community, and women's social networks, the camp gradually reorganized itself into socially recognizable neighbourhood clusters that reproduced aspects of Syrian urban and rural geography. These networks provided emotional support, collective childcare, information sharing, protection, and economic cooperation under conditions of displacement. Spatial proximity therefore became a mechanism for sustaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

The contrasting governance models for the two camps have also shaped the social dynamics within them. Our secondary research and fieldwork clearly suggest that developmental governance has fostered Al Hussein's (and East Amman's) social networks whereas humanitarian governance has limited community engagement in Al Zaatari. Al Hussein's spontaneous growth can be attributed to several reasons: GAM's shift in strategy for East Amman to include refugee camps in 1987 and multi-level planning hierarchy and the camp's symbolic designation as a 'temporary exceptional' space tied to the Palestinian political cause. This socio-spatial autonomy and legal recognition have enabled Al Hussein to function as a material and symbolic space of Palestinian existence.

Like the early Palestinian refugees in Al Hussein, Al Zaatari residents have been forced to adapt to a new country, develop their own migratory networks, and experience 'social dislocation' in reevaluating their sense of belonging in a new negotiated space. In contrast to Al Hussein, however, the lack of political recognition and Al Zaatari's closed environment depict Syrian refugees as stateless. Despite this characterization, host communities around Al Zaatari continue to blur the local/refugee divide: 30% of Mafraq residents are Syrian refugees now. The spatial dynamics suggests social transformation and community reformation in the making. Because the Syrian population inside Al Zaatari is not ethnically divided (most of the refugees are from Syria's Dara'a by origin versus those outside the camp originating from the governorates of Aleppo, Hama, and rural Damascus (UNICEF, Informal Tented Settlements in Jordan), community formation in these areas appear to be based on ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

5.3. Psychological Well-being and Identity/Belonging

In the last two decades, political governance strategies have had two outcomes: humanizing or politicizing refugees, both impacting mental health and feelings of inclusion. Humanitarian governance neglects psychosocial support, while developmental governance offers mental health resources. Conversely, militarized governance often worsens trauma and anxiety through increased surveillance and insecurity. Findings from both camps revealed a complex interplay of emotions, identities, and governance. At Al Hussein, the strongest feeling was a sense of belonging to Palestine, linked to a socio-spatial identity that questions the concept of 'home'.

> Jabal al-Al Hussein is part of central Amman today – you cross a street and you are in the middle of commercial markets. Yet inside the alleys, it remains a Palestinian space where everyone knows who came from Lydda, Ramla, or Jaffa. (Refugee, Al Hussein camp)

Humanitarian issues like shelter, services, and authority interaction also surfaced during interviews, indicating dissatisfaction with existing structures. In an interview with a father-son duo at Al Hussein, the generational priorities were on display, with the father expressing deep-seated pain and longing for 'home' while the son focused on the impact of limited aid for the camp's residents.

> My father, who was a 1948 refugee, had to take refuge in a cave with others to survive the weather until they were given tents. They were also told that they would get their old homes back in a matter of weeks. It has been more than 70 years now in Jordan, and the struggle continues. People thought that when our generation dies, the claim to our lands would also die, but the young don't forget. Like me, my son wants to return to our village. (Refugee, father, Al Hussein camp)

> When I voice my frustration about the conditions in the camp today, my father tells me how much worse it was decades ago. Today, we have electricity, but it disappears for hours every day. Water too. Good employment opportunities are rare. Some boys can afford to leave the camp, but their families fear losing our collective Palestinian identity [that is] so strong within the camp. From what we hear from UNRWA, we also believe that we may lose the right to return one day if we leave. (Refugee, son, Al Hussein camp)

Al Hussein reflects Jordan's strategy of including and excluding refugees, aiming to naturalize them as citizens while asserting their refugee status to preserve the right to return (Dhingra, 2014). Granting citizenship to Palestinian refugees (excluding Gaza) bolstered the monarchy's power while enabling them to maintain their status for international aid. Refugees, as individual political agents, respond according to their goals, connections, and resources (Dhingra, 2014). Palestinian refugees in Amman, including Al Hussein residents, actively blur the line between citizen and refugee. Compared to the Syrian population, political recognition and UNRWA support have improved the psychological well-being of Palestinian refugees.

Al Zaatari's Syrian refugees are new to Jordan and remain outside the Jordanian political system. The camp's securitization, seen as a political tactic, relies on national and international aid, casting residents as 'victims' in temporary spaces. Indeed, interviews reveal a strong desire among residents to return home:

> We have been here for more than 10 years now, and things are changing constantly. We are told this is a temporary camp, but it is still a struggle to maintain daily life when work permits are either not given or are very expensive. We can't live here forever; we want to go home but we also are not sure what happens tomorrow. (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp)

The wish to return home gets entangled with everyday preoccupations, in particular the ability to work:

> We would like to work more but after Assad's departure from Syria, the economy here has dropped. Work keeps us busy; without it, I stay at home for a long time and feel depressed. (Refugee, Al Zaatari camp)

To address this, Syrian refugees have called for a greater degree of self-governance within the camp and are increasingly engaged in political activity to achieve it. Yet Jordan resists developing Syrian camps into 'independent camp republics' like Al Hussein, keeping them separate from other refugee populations and Jordanians.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The comparative evidence demonstrates that refugee agency is central to the production of socio-material space in both Al Hussein and Al Zaatari, but the governance regime determines the institutional conditions under which that agency can be exercised, recognized, and translated into durable spatial transformation. Three interconnected findings emerge from the comparison.

First, governance establishes the conditions within which refugee-led spatial transformation occurs. At Al Hussein, the transition from humanitarian administration toward developmental and urban integration created conditions in which resident-led adaptations could accumulate over several decades. The resulting landscape is therefore neither a product of formal planning alone nor simply an informal settlement; it is an accumulated socio-spatial formation produced through the interaction of resident practices and evolving governance arrangements. Al Zaatari demonstrates the same relationship under substantially different governance conditions. The camp was initially established through a centralized humanitarian and securitized model emphasizing control, registration, movement restrictions, and aid distribution. Nevertheless, residents rapidly transformed the planned environment. Shams-Élysées with its ~3,000 refugee-operated businesses, illustrates how resident practices transformed a circulation route established within the formal camp plan into a major economic and social space.

Second, social networks are the principal mechanism through which refugee agency is spatially expressed. Across both camps, settlement patterns cannot be explained solely through formal spatial planning or the distribution of services. Kinship, village, tribal, religious, economic, and community networks influence where residents locate themselves, how they organize households, how they access resources, and how they reproduce cultural practices. These practices and arrangements created social support networks, collective childcare, information exchange, protection, and systems of reciprocity. Spatial proximity therefore operated not simply because of camp planning but as a mechanism through which residents reproduced social cohesion and cultural continuity under conditions of displacement.

Third, the comparison demonstrates that governance influences whether resident-led adaptations remain informal practices or become durable elements of the urban landscape. This is perhaps the most significant distinction between the two cases. At Al Hussein, the distinction between camp and city has consequently become increasingly blurred. At Al Zaatari, by contrast, many of the same processes of self-organization and spatial appropriation have occurred, but within an institutional framework that continues to emphasize temporariness and security.

Taken together, these findings indicate that refugee agencies and governance should not be understood as opposing explanations of camp development. Rather, they are mutually constitutive. Refugees actively produce social space through everyday practices of inhabitation, association, commerce, cultural reproduction, and spatial adaptation, while governance determines the institutional boundaries within which these practices can develop. Governance may constrain, enable, tolerate, regulate, or eventually institutionalize resident-led practices.

The resulting socio-material landscape is therefore negotiated rather than simply planned or informal. Putting it another way, the causal relationship is not 'Governance → refugee agency → socio-material landscape' but 'Governance → enables/constrains agency → agency transforms space → institutional actors adapt governance → new socio-material landscape.' This recursive relationship, where governance itself appears to adapt in response to refugee agencies, underscores the theories of space production and assemblage driving the development of camps.

The findings have implications for the governance of refugee camps that have developed, or can potentially develop, into long-term urban environments. Rather than treating resident-led spatial practices exclusively as informal deviations from formal planning, governance systems should recognize them as sources of knowledge about social organization, spatial need, cultural identity, and infrastructure use. This does not imply replacing formal governance with unregulated self-organization. Instead, it suggests the value of governance arrangements that create meaningful opportunities for refugee participation in decisions concerning infrastructure, services, mobility, livelihoods, neighborhood organization, and spatial upgrading.

Future refugee-camp governance should move beyond a binary distinction between humanitarian control and refugee-led development. More adaptive and participatory forms of governance can allow institutional actors to respond to the socio-spatial practices that emerge from within camps while maintaining necessary responsibilities for protection, infrastructure, and public services. Multi-level governance may provide one possible institutional mechanism for achieving this, but the evidence presented here suggests that its value lies not in imposing a new governance model, but in creating mechanisms through which national authorities, municipalities, humanitarian organizations, development actors, and refugee communities can continually negotiate the evolution of these non-static humanitarian spaces.

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