LIFE IN EXILE

ARTICLES

4 NGO Governance and Syrian Refugee “Subjects” in Jordan
Sarah A. Tobin

10 Syrian Refugees in the Media
Katty Alhayek

12 Oasis in the Desert? Coproduction and the Future of Zaatari
Denis Sullivan and Charles Simpson

16 Putting Refugee Work Permits to Work
Vicky Kelberer

20 Mobilizing in Exile: Syrian Associational Life in Turkey and Lebanon
Killian Clarke and Gözde Güran

28 Growing Up in Wartime: Images of Refugee Children’s Education in Syrian Television Drama
Hayden Bates and Rebecca Joubin

34 Letter from Ellinikon
Parastou Hassouri

36 North Africa’s Invisible Refugees
Alice Wilson

SPECIAL REPORTS

40 Financial Citizenship and the Hidden Crisis of the Working Class in the “New Turkey”
Basak Kus

44 Becoming Arab American
Louise Cainkar

REVIEW

46 Jack Shenker, The Egyptians: A Radical Story
Joshua Stacher

EDITOR’S PICKS

48 New and Recommended Reading

PHOTOS/GRAPHICS
Samuel Aranda / Panos, Toufik Doudou/AP Photo, Khalil Mazraawi/Getty Images, Reuters/Feisal Omar, Reuters Photographer, Qamishlo House, Moises Saman/Magnum Photos, Murad Sezer/Reuters, Luca Sola/contrasto/Redux, UNHCR and ACTED/REACH, Rafi Wahbi, Claudia Wiens, Alice Wilson

COVER
Syrian children wait to carry goods in the Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan. (Muhammad Hamed/Reuters)
The Middle East is once again the world’s biggest producer of refugees, due primarily to the catastrophic war in Syria.

It is a distinction that has belonged to the region for much of the century since World War I. The aftermath of that conflict saw the Greek-Turkish “population exchange,” the forced death march of the Armenians and the resettlement of Assyrian Christians from Turkey in Iraq. Thirty years later, some 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homeland during the fighting after the creation of the state of Israel. For decades after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Afghans made up the largest refugee population in the world, their numbers ranging between 2 and 3 million. Successive wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and elsewhere uprooted millions more. In 2007, with civil war and anti-occupation insurgency raging at the same time, some 2 million Iraqis had crossed into Jordan or Syria in search of safe haven.

Sometime in the last two years, Syrians passed Afghans as the largest refugee population on earth. More than 4.8 million people have escaped into neighboring countries, fleeing the indiscriminate attacks of regime and rebel forces alike, not to speak of the depredations of the Islamic State, or ISIS.

None of these figures capture the immense scale of wartime displacement, since in many cases, most of the displaced persons do not traverse an international border. More than 6 million Syrians, for instance, have been pushed out of their homes but are still living in Syria. Many of these people are compelled to move several times. The family of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year old boy whose drowned body awoke Western opinion to the Syrian refugee crisis in the fall of 2015, fled from Damascus to Aleppo to Kobane to Turkey before the attempted Mediterranean passage that took the lives of Alan and his mother and brother. Before the war, some 560,000 Palestinian refugees lived in Syria, and almost all of them are now displaced again, either inside or outside the country.

Still less visible are the 2.4 internally displaced persons in Yemen, where factional fighting and Saudi-led bombardment continues despite peace talks in Kuwait. Yemen’s neighbors closed the borders, and the Saudis and their Gulf Arab allies maintain a strict naval blockade. It is probably only because very few Yemenis can get out that there is no mass flight from southwestern Arabia, as well. A mere 30,000 or so have managed to leave by boat to Djibouti or Somalia.

Global media attention to refugees of any origin was intermittent until mid-2015, when Syrians in particular began heading for Europe in large numbers, due to temporarily loosened asylum laws in Germany and Sweden. The Kurdi tragedy, the thousands of other migrant deaths in capsized boats in the Mediterranean, the 71 Syrians who suffocated in a ditched tractor trailer in Austria, the weary columns hiking through Hungary—the swirl of wrenching images was suddenly non-stop. The media began to refer to a “migration crisis” in large part because the displacement in the Middle East now impinged on
Europe’s domain. Political backlash and retightened asylum procedures soon put an end to the round-the-clock coverage. But the exodus of Syrians, together with Afghans, Eritreans, Somalis, Sudanese and others, constitutes the largest movement of refugees since World War II. This enormous displacement is a crisis whether the mainstream media is paying attention or not.

The crisis consists of multiple humanitarian emergencies, to be sure, but also of a political-economic impasse. For the better part of a hundred years, the Middle East has been not just the biggest producer of refugees but also the biggest host of refugee populations. Most of the Palestinian refugees and their descendants reside in Jordan, Lebanon and (formerly) Syria, as well as the West Bank and Gaza. Afghan refugees dwell in Iran and Pakistan; Somalis in Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen; and so on. The clear pattern is that refugees wind up in states that are poor, weak and maybe even imploding themselves. Stronger states, such as the Gulf monarchies, can keep them out. Unable in most cases to go home, and often blocked from gainful employment in exile, the refugees live in permanent limbo. The host governments regard them warily at best.

The international legal regime created after World War II to deal with refugees is no remedy for inequalities of state power, on either the regional or the international level.

The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear” is unwilling to return. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees...
(UNHCR), founded in 1950, is charged with providing relief to people thus classified and to protect them from refoulement—deportation to their country of origin. The UNHCR is also tasked with helping people with refugee status find a “durable solution” to their exile—repatriation if possible, asylum in the host country or resettlement to a third country. Not every refugee population enjoys these protections—Palestinians, for instance, are regarded as ineligible, though they do receive aid from an agency established for them. But the UNHCR’s ability to carry out its mandate when refugees are considered refugees is heavily dependent on circumstances. Look at the case of Syrians.

The frontline states in the Syrian crisis do not consider themselves bound by the international legal regime. Neither Jordan nor Lebanon, the second and third largest host countries of Syrians, respectively, is a signatory of the 1951 Convention. Turkey, the largest host country, did sign the compact but with the proviso that it would treat only fleeing Europeans as refugees. To limit the size of the refugee population, all three states have closed their borders, at least for a time, and sent people back to Syria against their will. In the spring of 2015, Lebanon asked the UNHCR to deregister all the Syrians who had entered the country since that January and then to suspend registration of subsequent arrivals. In Jordan, though the government has softened its stance against work permits for Syrians, there is likewise little possibility of a “durable solution.” Turkey claims to have an “open-door policy,” but in practice has turned Syrian refugees into a political football in its contentious relations with Europe.

With the war in Syria continuing, and repatriation a distant prospect at best, resettlement outside the Middle East would seem to be the most “durable solution” for Syrian refugees. But there, too, the spirit of the times is uncongenial to the letter of international law. In both Europe and the United States, the politics of the Syrian refugee crisis are very ugly, replete with assumptions that all Syrians are potential members of ISIS. The northern-tier European states offering liberalized asylum terms in the fall of 2015 changed course under domestic pressure. Instead the European Union has stepped up its prime border control measure—bribing countries like Turkey with aid packages to prevent refugees and migrants from heading north in the first place. The Obama administration has tried to dispel the crazier xenophobia surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis, but has done little to ameliorate the crisis itself. As of early April, according to Human Rights First, the US had resettled 1,285 of the mere 10,000 Syrians it pledged to welcome in 2016. These paltry numbers suggest that Syrians cannot look westward for succor.

None of the foregoing addresses the invidious distinction drawn between “refugees,” people fleeing violent conflict or persecution as per the wording of the 1951 Convention, and “migrants,” people escaping economic hardship and truncated life chances, often in countries where political repression is also severe. The mainstream media has often used the terms interchangeably in its coverage of the “migration crisis,” in deference to state narratives that most of the arrivals on European shores were seeking jobs rather than asylum. This substitution is doubly sly: It hints that the legal and moral responsibilities of Western nations to war refugees are not that great, and it reinforces the notion that migrants are not deserving of assistance or sympathy. Indeed, it is common for applicants for EU asylum to be rejected on the grounds that they are “migrants” rather than “refugees.” Such decisions are particularly cruel, as Parastou Hassouri writes in this issue, in the case of people who departed their war-torn home countries as refugees and then left their host countries for economic or other reasons. Serial displacement, it seems, can strip away the protections of the international refugee regime.

Mass displacement, finally, is a crisis for the countries that are losing their people. Syria, where fully half the population is either in refugee abroad or internally displaced, has lost a whole generation, many of whom, one must surmise, will never go back. Many of these people, as Killian Clarke and Gözde Güran write in this issue, were active in the 2011 uprising, in which they learned leadership skills and gained organizing experience that Syria will need badly when, at long last, it comes time to rebuild. The inadequacy of the formal relief effort, ironically, has prompted many of these activists to mount efforts of communal self-help, some of which have a civic component. There is perhaps a sliver of hope for Syria to be found in the work of these enterprising Syrians as they endure life in exile.
NGO Governance and Syrian Refugee “Subjects” in Jordan

Sarah A. Tobin

The typical image of the Syrian refugee camp in Jordan is one of suffering. Journalistic account after account introduces spectacular stories of devastation and loss. While perhaps dramatized, these tales are not false. Syrian refugee camps have forced hundreds of thousands of strangers to live together in austere, unequal and artificially constructed communities, which are subject to new national laws. To live in the camps is indeed to endure or have endured some form of suffering—but also to be part of a collective of survivors. As M. Cameron Hay puts it, “suffering is “an assault that forces adaptation,” and it “is a problem that needs solutions—not necessarily long-term solutions, but ways for a sufferer to get through the everyday batterings that undermine his or her horizons.” Refugees seek such solutions daily—finding work, making marriage or new family arrangements, and pursuing education or training—to alleviate present suffering in exile and to forestall future suffering, whether in Jordan or back in Syria.

The Jordanian government, and the non-governmental organizations to which it has outsourced the provision of humanitarian aid and services in refugee camps, also attempt to find solutions to refugee suffering. The aid regime in Jordan is a neoliberal formation—a political-economic arrangement wherein the role of government is minimal and private-sector actors are supposed to be the key problem solvers. In practice, however, neoliberalism winds up putting the responsibility for solving problems on the shoulders of those who have them. Neoliberalism is also often understood as a moral endeavor in which market-oriented, idealized and entrepreneurial

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individuals hold out the “best” and most effective hope for resilience. In the case of Syrian refugees in camps, the Jordanian government has largely limited its activities to regulating camp access and deploying police. Hundreds of NGOs operate in camps throughout Jordan. Chief among these sites is Zaatari, the second largest refugee camp in the world, and home to nearly one sixth of the Syrian refugees in Jordan, with a regular population of 80,000–100,000. Neoliberal governance of the Syrian refugees has resulted in both the privatization of the refugee experience and attempts at cultivating new moral subjects and, indeed, the “ideal refugee.”

As part of the neoliberal framework, NGOs working with Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan have tried to inculcate certain “proper” or “ideal” understandings of women and work, youth, and early marriage, or the marriage of teenage girls. In each of these cases, the NGO guidelines for the “appropriate” understanding differ from those anticipated by Syrian refugees—and the outcomes are unexpected as well.

**NGOs in Zaatari**

Over 200 NGOs are currently working on Syrian refugee response and relief in the Middle East. A large number of these organizations are present in Zaatari. The NGOs are local, national and international. They provide a dizzying array of services, from schooling and training—vocational or otherwise—to food aid, first aid or health care, and water and sanitation.

Entering Zaatari, one cannot help but be struck by the bustle of activity. As Jordanian officials check papers for permission to enter, children on bicycles or pushing wheelbarrows roll by. Women and men carrying large bags of goods presumably for sale or trade walk by, as do Jordanian and Syrian NGO staffers in colored vests. Cars and trucks emblazoned with NGO logos drive by. Ask a refugee where an NGO is located, and the likely response is, “Check at base camp.” Base camp is the colloquial name given to the administrative offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as most of the NGOs. These offices sit in the northwest section of Zaatari, closest to the main entrance and exit. Every morning hundreds of Jordanian and foreign staffers arrive at base camp by bus, truck or car to commence their duties. Many NGOs will then bring the foreign staff to the centers they occupy throughout the camp. All NGO staff reverse this process around 3 pm, when they come back to base camp and load up in buses, trucks and cars for return to Amman, Jordan’s capital.

Among the NGO staff I interviewed, a common frustration was that they rarely engage with Syrian refugees themselves. Those staff whose offices are in base camp may encounter a few refugees there, but they are rarely if ever given permission to enter the camp. In fact, base camp maintains a “line of sight” barrier to such exposure in the form of chain-link fencing, barbed wire, and dark colored mesh and canvas. In 2014, I was told by the UNHCR administration that this barrier was erected to keep the NGO staff safe. There had been complaints of children and others throwing rocks and trash at NGO workers within base camp. The physical separation between many NGO staff and Syrian refugees serves to limit interaction between the two groups.

As a result, Syrian refugees are left to navigate the wide array of NGOs largely on their own, relying on extended family networks and connections for information and access. Refugees are thus required to work hard not only to manage their everyday survival and sustenance, but also to calculate their daily schedules in accordance with those of unseen administrators. On a given day in Zaatari, a refugee will go to the World Food Program for the daily bread distribution, then to one of the stores that will accept food coupons for perishable goods such as milk and eggs, and return home to cook breakfast. Following breakfast, the same refugee may send a kindergartener to a Save the Children center for school, while sending an older child to a different UNHCR-run elementary school at another end of the camp. During school hours, parents may attend educational or vocational trainings of their own at any number of NGOs around the camp. They might be interested in learning English, for example, but find that English lessons are only offered two days per week from one NGO and three days per week from another, which also teaches a highly desirable computer class in the same time slot. All the while, refugees may pursue informal projects—from sewing to tutoring—to bring in some additional cash. Refugees do all of the above while attending to the maintenance of their housing structures with UNHCR, medical care from one of the many different clinics or hospitals in the camp, and distribution of other resources—such as water—which comes from yet another NGO. Syrian refugees must manage not only the type of aid provision they seek and the location for distribution, but also the schedule of the offerings around the camp.

Managing aid provision schedules has become a form of unpaid labor for Syrian refugees. As with the irregular work schedules of the poor in the United States, the irregular “work schedule” of aid provision requires a massive investment of time and energy in order to avoid further insecurity and suffering. This investment sets the stage for the moral “work” of NGOs in creating ideal refugees and future citizens, whether in Jordan, Europe or back in Syria.

**Women and Work**

NGOs have become part of the Zaatari aid landscape by hiring refugees in so-called Cash for Work programs. Through these programs, camp residents “volunteer” for NGOs, receiving a standard stipend determined by whether the work is deemed highly skilled, skilled or unskilled. For highly skilled professionals the pay rate is two Jordanian dinars per hour or $2.82. For skilled laborers the pay is 1.5 Jordanian dinars ($2.11) per hour. For unskilled laborers the rate is one Jordanian dinar per hour or $1.41. Each “volunteer” may work for six hours per day.
According to a top UNHCR camp administrator, “Cash for Work is an absolutely vital part of the overall humanitarian assistance to refugees in the camp. It is so important that our goal is for Cash for Work to reach every household in Zaatari.” Cash for Work is, therefore, an integral piece of the camp economy. The UNHCR and its NGO partners understand Cash for Work as “vital” because it supplements cash assistance to camp refugees and, as crucially, it cultivates a sense of “self-reliance” and “ownership” among Zaatari residents. As they place responsibility for the development of the individual on the shoulders of the individuals themselves, Cash for Work programs represent a new formation of neoliberal governance in humanitarian crises.

The very language of the program is revealing. Technically, the program name is “Cash for Work,” but when I asked a Jordanian NGO worker in Zaatari about the program, she was confused. I asked her, “What is the name of the program in Arabic for ‘Cash for Work’? The program where Syrians inside the camp work for NGOs?” She responded, “There is no ‘cash for work’ program. Syrians are not allowed to work in Jordan.” I pushed back, “No, I mean the program where Syrians go to the NGO and work for six hours per day, making one or two dinars per hour.” She replied, “Oh! You mean the ‘volunteer program’?” Our conversation had been in Arabic, but she said the words “volunteer program” in English.

Whether the Cash for Work program is considered officially “work” depends on where one sits vis-à-vis camp administration. While high-ranking UNHCR officials discussed Cash for Work as that, Jordanian employees of NGOs and administrators discussed the program as a “volunteer” effort.

Whether one considers Cash for Work really work or not, the program’s rhetoric and aims, both explicit and implicit, are vital. NGO programs often include references to “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment,” as well as training for women to both enter and progress in the work force inside the refugee camp, largely due to restrictions on employment outside. (In March, however, the Jordanian government announced that the legal employment of Syrian refugees was permitted.) The hope is that the skills and training received better the conditions of women enough that even if their employment does not improve their domestic and neighborhood situations do. Such skills are deemed “life-long” with the potential benefit extending beyond the camp.

During a recent visit to the camp, I interviewed two NGO workers who employed women (and men) in Cash for Work programs. The mandate of the NGO was the driving ideological factor behind the programs offered and their technical components. The mandate is for the education and protection, as well as the “mainstreaming,” of youth. In an effort to bring in as many workers as possible, “youth” became defined as...
Youth

One of the challenges of situations of extreme vulnerability (particularly under neoliberal formations) is that youth often become used for non-“youthful” ends such as child labor. They may be tasked with transporting goods, possibly through smuggling, caring for younger siblings or neighbor children, or serving as representatives of the nuclear family in either an official or unofficial capacity.

While visiting the Cyber City camp for Palestinian refugees from Syria, I sat in on a parenting class given by Save the Children. Two Jordanian Save the Children staff members and two Syrian female Cash for Work “volunteers” conducted the class. There were about 15 women in attendance, ranging in age from 14 or 15 to 50. The class was called “Positive Discipline in Everyday Parenting,” and it followed a curriculum designed by developmental psychologist Joan E. Durrant. According to the Save the Children website, the aims of the curriculum are to encourage parents to use “positive discipline,” whose principles and methods, it is presumed, many parents do not understand. The idea is to teach parents how to set goals, create a positive home environment, understand how children think and feel, and solve problems under stress. The website goes on to explain that the curriculum includes hands-on exercises. The curriculum is designed for parents of children of all ages as well as other professionals and educators who work with parents and children.

The particular class I attended went through a series of phases of brain development among children. The earliest phase included newborns and toddlers. The next phases consisted of children between the ages of 2 and 5; the ages of 5 and 7; the ages of 7 and 10; and so on. But once the lesson moved to the brain development of youth aged 14–16, there was heated debate. The Save the Children staff indicated that these teens are “still youth,” in accordance with the curriculum and an objective claim of scientific “truth.” The Syrian refugees, on the other hand, advocated strongly that this positioning was wrong. Several middle-aged refugees insisted, with the agreement of the other refugee women, that Syrians between the ages of 14 and 16 are no longer “youth.” Rather, they argued, they are often serving as full adult members of their families. They are responsible for managing the household, for laboring for outside wages, and for representing the family in an official capacity with NGOs and the Jordanian government.

Save the Children staff turned back to the science of brain development featured in the curriculum. By all accounts, they emphasized, the children’s brains had not developed and therefore they were still considered young persons. At this point one of the Syrian refugees said, “My son is a man. His father is dead. His uncles are dead. His brothers are dead. He is the only one left. How can you say that he is still young? He has experienced the world of an adult in the body of a 14-year old.” The Save the Children staff then decided to close this line of conversation.

One Jordanian Save the Children staffer later told me that the official curriculum, which was presumed also to be the Jordanian perspective, and the experiences and outlooks of the refugees were very different. The differences were described as “cultural.” This staff member said to me, “The refugees need to learn this information in order to make their lives better here.” In a later conversation another Save the Children staffer indicated that these “cultural differences” had also emerged when the curriculum turned to domestic violence. The staffer claimed that the refugees felt that domestic violence, particularly directed at children, was the only means by which the children would heed their parents’ admonitions. The Jordanian staff member expressed shock and frustration that the debates for the Syrians centered on acceptable “degrees of violence” rather than the acceptability of violence itself.

Child labor is another area in which NGOs such as Save the Children, among others, have been working. In Zaatari,
child labor is apparent everywhere. Children can be seen delivering goods in wheelbarrows from one store to another or to residences in tents or caravan mobile home units. Children can be seen sifting gravel for homemade concrete. Children can be seen clerking and cleaning up in stores. NGOs such as Save the Children strive to keep the children enrolled in one of the many schools in the camp such as those run by UNHCR, or alternatively, to provide an education and activity center that offers lessons, games and healthy snacks. The NGOs often discussed the idea that keeping children in schools is a primary means by which adolescence can be maintained, even protracted and extended, and the stages of childhood development preserved. “Preserving childhood” has become an explicit aim for many NGOs and their donors alike.

While neoliberal governance creates a space for the private sector to flourish, concomitant with it come demands that work in the private sector is subject to certain moral parameters. In this case the parameters are the exclusion of youth under the age of 18 from formal and regulated labor force participation. While at home the adolescents may be understood as fully functioning adults, according to NGO governance and subjectivity cultivation, the hardship of the refugee camp is not enough to waive the moral imperative.

### Early Marriage

In the last few years, hundreds if not thousands of newspaper articles and NGO reports have been written highlighting what is perceived to be the “problem” of early marriage among Syrian refugees. These reports condemn such practices as they confront Western understandings of the proper age of marriage for girls, and the proper age gap between marriage partners. The stories that are the most graphic and revolting are those of girls aged 12, 13 or 14 who are married to a man over 50 or 60, particularly one from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. The stereotype accordingly plays up the idea of an elderly, but wealthy Gulf resident marrying a youthful, even “innocent” girl, and removing her from her natal family in the refugee camp for purposes of the family’s economic stability. Such accounts are understood as “child trafficking” or “modern-day slavery,” even a form of prostitution.

Over the course of the last 24 months of my research into early marriage in the Syrian refugee camps, I have found that this stereotype rarely comes to fruition. Much more frequently reported are cases of girls aged 13, 14 or 15 who are betrothed to male relatives within the camp who are aged 17,
18 or 19. By most definitions, “early marriage” rests on the age of the female getting married, rather than the male. By these criteria, even a 15-year-old Syrian marrying a 16-year-old cousin would count.

In my own experiences, I found that young women in these arrangements did not always portray themselves as victims without agency. From one visit, I wrote in my field notes:

I walked into the women’s clothing store on the Champs d’Elysees in Zaatari, and Lara greets me. She’s a 13-year-old Syrian refugee from Dar’a, and her happiness is overwhelming. “Welcome to the store!” She’s beaming and happy to talk to me, despite the fact that the Jordanian army escorts continue to yell at me, “Hurry up, Sarah! Don’t talk so long!” Lara and I make small talk about the store—how much the hijabs are and which abayas are more popular. Lara herself is wearing a tattered black abaya, one that she has outgrown in her early-teen growth spurt. Her head is covered with a dark pink hijab. Her clothing isn’t new, but it is clean, as are her feet, which is a strikingly noticeable feature in this immensely dusty place. Lara eagerly takes me from item to item, and slowly I realize she’s led me to the back of the store. “Lara,” I ask, “why are you so happy?” Quietly, and almost embarrassed to be feeling this joy in the midst of such sorrow, she answers, “I am able to do something good for myself here. I’m working at the store, which I love, but also...I’m getting married next week. And I really love him. He’s my neighbor here, and I wouldn’t have met him outside this place. He’s so handsome. It’s like a soap opera.

But arranged marriages of young cousins or new neighbors are troubling to many who work in NGO governance. First, they are deemed “illegal” as the age of consent for marriage in Jordan is 16 for the female, and marriages must be registered locally in accordance with Jordanian law. The more important problem for many NGOs is that early marriage represents an advancing adulthood and an end to innocent girlhood as well as the girl’s education. According to some NGO staff I interviewed, young girls whose bodies may not be physically mature enough to deliver a child are getting married to more muscular and potentially angry, disenfranchised and violent young men, echoing the warnings about domestic violence and abuse.

Conversations I had with NGO leaders and employees indicated that the concerns about early marriage were driven both by moral concern for the refugees and by a keen interest in obtaining donor funds. One employee of an NGO indicated to me that, while yes, it was true that early marriage was a problem for him from a moral perspective,

It’s also the case that when we talk about it donors respond. They really respond to this. It helps us get money for programs that really need some attention that we can’t otherwise raise money for. I mean, who is going to fund teacher training or empowerment programs for young boys? However, young boys do need attention also. But the West seems to be afraid of them, of the Syrian refugee youth. No one wants to fund programs for young men.

What such characterizations eliminated from the discussion is that occurrences of early marriage may be less coerced than the media and NGOs believe. Of the Syrian female adolescents I interviewed who were engaged to be married, they anticipated that getting married earlier would help, not only to reduce burdens on their natal families, but also to secure their safety around the camp, protecting them from physical harm, including in spaces perceived to be high-risk in the camp such as bathrooms and showers. The females also indicated that marriage would give them a heightened sense of responsibility and agency in an otherwise debilitating environment. Many of them cited the disincentives for completing their high school education, including crowded schools and a lack of post-secondary educational prospects.

A complicating factor is that programming against early marriage is designed only for the Jordanian context. Journalistic and NGO reports rarely account for what the practices of the Syrians might have been before they arrived from Syria. Instead, they imprint local sensibilities and laws on the refugee population, at times challenging young women to choose between family and tradition, and what they hope or anticipate might be their futures. The lack of baseline data on the practices in Syria before the war makes early marriage subject to moral condemnation rather than empathetic consideration.

While I was interviewing moneychangers in 2014, curious passersby would stop and contribute their thoughts on the discussion. At one point, a middle-aged woman stopped and asked if I had been the researcher asking about early marriage. When I replied that, yes, that was me, she gathered a few of her friends and family members together. Each described, in turn, how they had been married as teenagers in Syria. One was married at the age of 14, two at 15 and one at 16. They all spoke with pride at serving as mothers to many smart, productive and beautiful children. The woman who had gathered the women also brought her son. Beaming with pride, she said, “This is my son, Muhammad. He’s 16 and he’s the man of our house. He has taken over since his father died, and looked out for us. He’s getting married next week.” Muhammad smiled and added, “I’m really happy.”

In fact, early marriage was not uncommon in Syria before the crisis. According to UNICEF, 3 percent of Syrian girls were married by age 15 and 13 percent by age 18, although the practice may be more prevalent in rural areas such as the southern province of Dar’a (the region many, if not most, of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are from). According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, the marriage rate stood at 3 percent for girls under 15 and 18 percent for girls under 18, with Dar’a as the governorate with the highest rate in pre-war Syria (5 percent) and—interestingly—a higher prevalence in urban areas (4 percent). According to the Jordanian government, between January and June 2014, 32 percent of registered marriages of Syrian refugees were of girls under 18.

The displacement of Syrian refugees from their homes in Syria into a geographically and demographically uncertain terrain has had unintended consequences when it comes to
Syrian Refugees in the Media

Katty Alhayek

It was September 2, 2015 when the Syrian refugee crisis abruptly came to dominate the English-language media. On that day broadcast and print outlets led with the iconic image of Alan Kurdi, 3, lying lifeless on a Turkish beach after his family’s failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. The shocking picture prompted solemn pronouncements from Western leaders regarding the world’s responsibility to care for refugees, even as actual policy in most Western countries got worse.

In the United States, the increased attention to the refugee crisis prompted outright hostility. Thirty-one governors pledged not to accept Syrians in their states. The House of Representatives passed a bill suspending programs for admission of Syrian and Iraqi refugees with 47 Democrats and 242 Republicans voting in favor.

The general tenor of media coverage helps to explain the nasty political environment. A quantitative comparison by Abby Jones found that British and Canadian media were more inclined to compassionate, welcoming themes than US outlets, which generally portrayed Syrians as dangerous strangers to be kept out of the country.

And there are deeper problems with the media coverage that predate the “migration crisis” story of the fall of 2015. One is the preoccupation with the Mediterranean crossing, when the numbers clearly show that the Middle East is the center of Syrian displacement. More than half of the Syrian population (some 13.5 million people) is in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. The majority of these people are internally displaced inside Syria. Another 4.8 million Syrians fled the country into neighboring states, mainly Turkey (close to 3 million), Lebanon (more than 1 million), Jordan (more than 640,000) and Iraq (250,000). What the English-language media began calling the “migration crisis” refers to the 1,321,560 persons who requested asylum in European Union member states in 2015. Less than 400,000 of the asylum seekers are Syrian refugees.

In covering the crisis in the Middle East, English-language media has focused heavily on “traditional” settings such as the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. This fenced-off expanse of tents is easy for reporters to find. But only some 80,000 of the Syrian refugees in Jordan live there. The invisible refugees are those who escaped Zaatari to the outskirts of Amman and other Jordanian cities. Many of these Syrians have no UN documentation and thus no formal access to aid.

Inside Zaatari, as well, the process of knowledge production is rife with inequality and misrepresentation. There are too many privileged foreigners who come to the camp to take photos and make videos without taking the time to understand the diversity of the Syrians’ experiences. Some of these “camp tourists” are Syrians from the diaspora. When I was a volunteer in Zaatari with an activist organization, I saw upper-class

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the topic of early marriage. Many young girls find themselves surrounded by new neighbors and extended family members that they had not known in Syria. Such exposure is simultaneously understood as risky to one’s reputation and as physically hazardous. It also has provided a new opportunity for young girls to engage in social network formation of their own design, which may be resonant with the perceived age-appropriate experiences of their mothers and aunts.

Shifting the Burden

Each of these cases demonstrates that neoliberal governance by NGOs shifts burdens onto the shoulders of women and children, especially in situations of suffering and uncertainty. In fact, neoliberal governance further contributes to the suffering and the uncertainty by rendering Syrian refugees responsible for their own management and aid provision. The self-regulation, however, is understood as needing to occur within certain moral parameters.

These moral parameters do not formally or officially allow children to earn an income or marry young, even if they may want to. The stigma against child labor does not excuse youth from “work;” however. Youth are to “work” at being “good moral persons” by going to school and completing their high school education, even if doing so has seemingly few short- and long-term rewards.

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Syrian visitors in fancy clothing and jewelry snapping pictures of themselves hugging and kissing refugee children without any effort at meaningful communication. They seemed mainly intent on returning to their circles at home with visual proof of their “charitable” work. There is a certain type of local male fixer who purports to know all about the lives of the poor refugees. When such fixers accompany foreign journalists with their own Orientalist preconceptions, and the subjects of the story are refugee women, the final product is one of the most dehumanizing representations of Syrian refugees to be found.

Many Syrian refugees and activists want their stories to be shared, but with considerably more humility and respect for the refugees’ actual interest than the “camp tourists” display. Properly handled, the refugees’ tales of suffering can offer them a way to heal.

Syrian refugees are largely represented as desperately poor people risking their lives to find a new home in the West. But a closer look at who really provides assistance to Syrian refugees in neighboring countries tells another story of Syrian resistance. In 2015, the UN regional refugee response plan for Syria had a budget of $1.3 billion, of which it raised only 35 percent. Syrian activist humanitarian organizations were crucial in filling the gap. Many of the men and women who run these organizations acquired networking and community service skills by participating in the Syrian uprising. These organizations connect individual donors—some drawn from previous generations of Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees who have become wealthy in exile—with the most needy of today’s refugees. Such networks depend on forging new kinship ties of care that are vital for resisting war’s devastation and rising anti-refugee sentiments as well as maintaining the physical and emotional wellbeing of the diasporic Syrian community. Highlighting such aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis demonstrates not only the agency of refugees but also the resources within the community.

Genuine solidarity with Syrian refugees means addressing the crisis as not just a humanitarian emergency but also the result of a political and economic conflict fueled by regional and international powers. The Syrian conflict and refugee crisis, further, are linked to other regional crises, such as those in Iraq and Yemen. The UN puts the civilian casualty toll of the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen at some 2,800 dead and 5,300 injured. More than 2.4 million Yemenis are internally displaced and more than 80 percent of the population requires some kind of humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, weapon sales from Western countries to Saudi Arabia and its allies were estimated at $18 billion in 2015. Such facts have motivated an international movement to stop these arms transfers. In March, a class-action suit was filed in Canada to halt a $15 billion sale of light- armored vehicles to Saudi Arabia. Such tactics are valuable tools for reducing the incidence of war—and thus the flight of refugees and internally displaced people—in the Middle East in the long run.

There is a noticeable tendency in Western media to foreground images of those Syrian children who are fair-haired and blue-eyed. But such manipulations cannot achieve justice for Syrian refugees in the face of increasing racism and Islamophobia. The responsibility of English-language media, in particular in the US, toward Syrian refugees is to humanize all refugees, wherever they are from, and to make relief efforts a top priority in the West while exposing the politics and economics behind the refugees’ plight.

managing and structuring family schedules with the highly fragmented and disparate NGO system for aid distribution and governance. The women who engage in Cash for Work are subject to hundreds of hours of classes and training that are believed to best prepare them for their position as “good” and “moral” subjects both inside and outside the camp, even if the horizon for life after the camp is not yet clear.

From constructions of “youth,” particularly for boys and young men, to understandings of domestic violence and parenting, to commonly agreed-upon appropriate ages for marriage and suitable partners for girls and young women, the preexisting Syrian practices have largely been eliminated from the aims and objectives of NGO providers. NGOs here are not seeking to bring stability to the Syrian refugee experience by supporting efforts to reproduce Syrian life and lifestyles, but are making the moment of intervention for aid distribution one of disjuncture with the past and inculcation of new practices for the future.

Endnotes
3 The list is available at: https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/partnerlist.php.
Oasis in the Desert?
Coproduction and the Future of Zaatari
Denis Sullivan and Charles Simpson

From the summer of 2012 through 2014, there were rapid influxes of refugees from Syria into the Zaatari camp in Jordan. The camp’s population spiked in early 2013—from 56,000 in January to a peak of 202,000 just four months later—overwhelming the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Jordanian government officials who were trying to maintain order. Such runaway growth would have been difficult to manage in an established city in a developed state, much less an ad hoc community of tents in the desert.

Two processes emerged to fill the inevitable governance gap: informal community measures, beginning with self-appointed “street leaders,” and expansion of the formal institutions of the Jordanian government’s Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) along with the UNHCR. Over 2013, these governance systems developed simultaneously but at times in conflict. It was not until 2014 that determined efforts began to link the systems together through community gatherings, police reforms and opportunities for refugee employment. It is a provisional success of governance “coproduction”—a system that effectively includes input and action from both formal institutions and the residents they serve. As a result, Zaatari represents an oasis of sorts for Syrians fleeing war, but one whose long-term viability is unclear.

Opening the Governance Gap

The most immediate problem after Zaatari’s chaotic expansion was widespread insecurity. Although many media portrayals were exaggerated, speaking of “mafias” and “anarchy,” the camp...
was in fact disorderly. Kilian Kleinschmidt, the UNHCR's camp manager from March 2013 to October 2014, is quoted as describing the level of insecurity in the first few years of Zaatari's existence as “shocking.” Theft, domestic violence and smuggling were all common.

Exacerbating the insecurity was a failure to meet resident expectations for quality of life. UNHCR standard operating procedures—with individual allotments of liters of water, calories of food and square meters of housing—were simply inadequate, given the diversity of the camp's demographics. Middle-class refugees expected more than basic needs, especially as their time in the camp stretched out to years, and they required access to cell phones to communicate with their families, as well as Internet, TV or radio for news of Syria, air conditioning, refrigerators and jobs. Refugees from nomadic backgrounds expected less population density and more freedom of movement than the “one fifth of a tent” designated as appropriate living space. This misalignment of service provision and resident expectations led to riots at aid distribution sites, attacks on aid workers and vandalism of UNHCR equipment. Throughout 2013–2014, an average of five aid workers were injured each week, with some aid organizations reducing the scale of their services to minimize exposure to risk. The most basic function of government, security provision, had failed.

A second void was underdeveloped infrastructure. As crisis managers, UNHCR leaders were well equipped to organize the distribution of relief supplies, but not expert in urban planning. The infrastructure was haphazardly constructed and often unsafe. Pedestrians, large industrial vehicles and aid workers’ cars had to move through the same thoroughfares in tight proximity, causing collisions that were sometimes fatal to refugees. Accidents involving children were disproportionately frequent.

There were too few distribution sites for fresh water, leading to slow delivery and inconsistent supply. There was always enough drinking water to keep the refugees alive, but not enough for regular washing, cooking and other activities that allow a quality of life even a notch above basic survival. Additionally, toilets and other sanitation facilities were often far from tents, preventing women and children from safely reaching them at night. And as water demands increased in the summer heat, riots broke out.

Electrical infrastructure also proved insufficient to residents’ expectations, resulting in a ubiquity of illegal connections to the camp’s central grid in order to power TVs, radios, refrigerators, air conditioners, cell phones and other electronics. These shoddy hookups caused regular electrocutions and fires, and cost the UNHCR around $700,000 in stolen electricity. Attempts by camp electricians to remove illicit connections were often met with violent resistance or riots. UNHCR officials point out that refugee camps the world over are not generally “electrified,” yet Syrians in Zaatari not only take it for granted, but they expect an electrical grid improved over the “slipshod” one they themselves created. The gap was emblematic of a failure of a second crucial task of governance—maintaining the commons.

The final difficulty was social in nature. At the camp’s founding there was widespread fear of the unknown among refugees, international NGOs, and UNHCR and SRAD personnel. Many refugees feared authorities, assuming that the oppression they had experienced from security forces in Syria would be duplicated in Jordan. Many camp officials reciprocated the cynicism, spreading rumors of sleeper cells and criminals among the refugee population. No real data was available on crime rates to dispel these misperceptions, and relations between authorities and residents deteriorated further over rumors of violence between the two parties. The social contract had failed in the camp.

The governance gap created a stressful, insecure environment for Syrian residents (especially women and children), camp management personnel and aid workers alike. While the UNHCR and SRAD should be praised for quickly providing basic, life-sustaining services for the refugees from 2012 to 2014, at the same time these institutions failed to meet the quality-of-life needs and expectations of residents. Fortunately, governance gaps have a tendency to be filled like air rushing into a vacuum—in this case, the air came from informal measures taken by the Syrian residents themselves.

From the Bottom Up

The most profound bottom-up response to the governance gap was for Syrian refugees with access to power—gained through a combination of wealth, family influence and connections with influential Jordanians—to become self-appointed “street leaders.” These men—who UNHCR and foreign aid staff referred to as “Abus,” from the Arabic word for father—ran resource distribution (sometimes illegally), organized street patrols of young men recruited from within their patronage networks, and settled disputes within families and between communities and camp management. By mid-2013, the street leaders had developed a nascent system of informal security and governance, with each claiming responsibility for one or two blocks of the camp, organizationally layered beneath “super” street leaders who coordinated at the district level.

The “Abus” filled the governance gap further by managing makeshift infrastructural improvements to meet resident demands, including electrical connections, insulation of shelters, and a market for food, cleaning supplies, electronics and desalinated water, among other items. The street leaders were not entirely benevolent, however; some took advantage of the governance gap as an opportunity to make profits from smuggling and other crimes. From this activity came the notion that the “Abus” acted more frequently like a “mafia.”

Also influential were the numerous community leaders a step below the “Abus” in terms of authority. These figures—including soccer coaches, college-aged youth mentors,
entrepreneurs, and networks of mothers and fathers—provided a semblance of social order at the neighborhood level and help to emotionally overwhelmed parents. Community leaders created a social safety net, escorting children to and from school, helping each other with resource acquisitions serving as grief counselors, settling disputes, and developing a system of norms for appropriate behavior in their neighborhoods.

Without a formal plan or organization, the street leaders and community leaders created a social network that was generally successful in providing informal governance of the camp. While these improvised measures filled the governance gap from the bottom up, they were not a durable solution for the major problems in Zaatari.

**From the Top Down**

Occurring alongside the grassroots response were the top-down measures taken by the UNHCR and SRAD, focused on expanding their authority in the camp. The immediate steps were simple coercion. In 2013, each week as many as 10,000 refugees entered Jordan. But contemplating the specters of instability in Zaatari, smuggling and transnational terrorism, the Jordanian government essentially closed the border in October 2014, after which the entry rate dropped as low as seven people per day. Jordan’s decision was widely criticized by international humanitarian actors, but it did give the authorities in Zaatari time to catch up with the enormous demand from the refugee population.

Today the border remains largely closed, with patrols every five kilometers supported by US military advisers and equipment. Any vehicle crossing the border—with or without verification that it does not carry civilians—may be hit with an airstrike. This exercise of hard power has not stopped Syrians from entering Jordan, but it has greatly reduced the numbers.

A second contentious tactic was forcible return of camp residents labeled as dangerous criminals to Syria, where some faced the prospect of torture or execution by pro-regime forces. (Jordan is not signatory to the international conventions forbidding refoulement—deportation of refugees to their country of origin—though it does have two national laws banning the practice. These cases were not deemed to fall in the category of refoulement by the Jordanian State Security Court.) It was another severe mechanism for managing population growth.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR hired private security contractors to guard its buildings, equipment and vehicles. SRAD police officers, for their part, remained hidden away in their offices, as they were often too afraid of residents to patrol the streets. By April 2014, specialized units known as the “gendarmerie” and the desert police force were deployed on the camp’s periphery, ready to enter at any moment in vehicles mounted...
with machine guns. SRAD drew upon these forces to quell riots and deter attacks on aid workers.

By mid-2014, as camp authorities moved from crisis management to long-term planning, they began to pursue a system of coproduction, whereby the top-down and bottom-up measures would meet in the middle to run the camp. This strategic shift to soft power acknowledged that Syrian residents had a role to play in their own governance. First, however, real relationships had to be built between the UNHCR and SRAD leadership and the residents.

The UNHCR started early on that, despite the best intentions, “Given the vested interests [of street leaders], opposition to the plan, possibly of a violent nature, can be anticipated.” Resistance did indeed come from street leaders who had “shown opposition to UNHCR’s attempts to institutionalize governance and security provision” because they had “long profited from the disorder and built their own power bases.”

SRAD police and the UNHCR began to identify and detain “bad” street leaders. In response, some of Zaatarī’s street leaders conspired to abduct Kilian Kleinschmidt as a show of force.

Despite the risks, Kleinschmidt began sleeping inside the camp to demonstrate solidarity with “good” street leaders. The UNHCR leadership began arranging regular meetings with these men, in a dramatic change from previous policy. The cooperative leaders were then leveraged to oust non-cooperative ones. As one representative of the Innovation and Planning Agency, a consultant group that watched the process, told us in 2015, “[Kleinschmidt] gradually neutralized the bad ‘Abus’ with the good ‘Abus’: It wasn’t by force; it was by informal systems. He got more and more of the leaders on his side.”

By mid-2014 the UNHCR began collaborating with street leaders to resolve camp issues as divergent as shelters needing weatherproofing against heavy rain, reckless water truck drivers, electrical infrastructure and aid distribution. By the time Kleinschmidt handed over the UNHCR senior field coordinator role to Hovig Eytemezian on October 31, 2014, meetings with street leaders were routine. An effective system of coproduction of governance had been established.

**Coproduction**

The most widespread example of effective coproduction is the community gatherings that now occur across the camp. The gatherings began in Districts 3, 7 and 10, and at first were attended by some 20 refugees—a mere .2 percent of each district’s population—but they grew as word of their utility spread. Each week as many as 12 meetings now take place. Those attending engage in lively discussions of such wide-ranging issues as employment, unsafe or inadequate electricity, health services and schools. Refugees and camp management alike praise the meetings for their problem-solving successes.

The meetings are organized by delegated Community Mobilization Working Groups and chaired by UNHCR representatives. The chairs report to UNHCR managers every two weeks, passing resident complaints and suggestions upward. This structure was a compromise with SRAD: The original UNHCR plan was to have community gatherings run wholly by residents, but SRAD voiced concerns about losing sovereign authority in the camp if problem solving were put entirely in Syrians’ hands. The gatherings were thus altered to include the participation of the UNHCR, international NGOs, SRAD and police. The compromise appears to have worked, as resident surveys allude to greatly improved relations with formal governing institutions.

Religious leaders also played a role in filling the governance gap. A coproduced religious court was established to settle disputes. The UNHCR works with Syrian imams in the refugee population to train shari’a court judges and legal teams in practices that will be deemed officially legitimate by Jordanian authorities and socially and religiously legitimate by camp residents. The religious court has handled thousands of cases. Additionally, imams have been trained by aid organizations to act as behavioral health counselors for congregants, merging Western psychotherapy and Muslim philosophy for remediation of war trauma. Imams were sharing information about camp affairs beginning in 2012, but it was not until 2014 that the UNHCR and SRAD began making deliberate use of mosques as a venue. Officials now visit mosques to post general announcements on whiteboards; the imams deliver sermons to reach the camp’s large illiterate population; there are even puppet shows for children.

The built environment of the camp is also coproduced: Aid organizations, UNHCR and SRAD coordinate with residents to plan and develop infrastructure. A compromise has been found regarding the ad hoc electrical connections, for example. Rather than simply removing them all, as in Zaatarī’s founding years, camp management allows some hookups to remain, such as those powering air conditioners or refrigerators in the intense summer heat. When illegal connections are removed, utility workers are often escorted by a community police officer who can explain to residents why the connection must go and discuss alternatives. In some districts, hangers were added to main power lines, allowing refugees to improvise safer connections. Electricians in the camp may also provide guidance on how to tap the grid without creating a hazard.

**“Legibility”**

Another linking mechanism pursued by formal institutions was “legibility,” defined as the ability of camp authorities and residents to understand the camp space using the same terms and concepts. The streets were named in consultation with residents, for example, so that their mental maps would correspond to the charts of the UNHCR and SRAD and so that no street name would spark political controversy. A plan was also launched in May 2015 to add detail to the mapping, including a system of street addresses, to enable faster distribution of resources and police and ambulance responses.
Legibility also focuses on the social landscape of the camp. The UNHCR and SRAD have produced maps overlaid with anthropological data, such as resident region of origin and contact information for corresponding street leaders, allowing for more efficient communication between residents and authorities. Additionally, international NGOs and the UNHCR’s Child Protection and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence sub-working groups created safe spaces for children and women across the camp in July 2014, mapping the distribution of incidents of harassment or assault based on input from refugees. Today, these havens are dispersed across the camp.

For decades, humanitarian experts and international organizations have called upon host countries to give more work permits to refugees. Permits are posed as a way to alleviate the poverty of refugees and lessen their dependency on aid. Host countries have traditionally shunned the notion, however, fearing the creation of permanent populations of refugees in competition with citizens for jobs. Most host countries, in fact, have done the opposite, blocking access to work and deporting refugees found working illegally.

There has now been a major shift in the attitude of Jordan, one of the largest host countries of Syrian refugees. In their desperation to stem the northward flow of migrants, European Union countries made work permits for Syrians a condition of Jordan’s aid package at a London donors’ conference in February. According to these requirements in return for favorable loan terms from the International Monetary Fund, Jordan shocked observers by issuing work permits for Syrian refugees in March, a move that had previously been considered “non-negotiable.”

Jordan hosts more than 640,000 registered Syrian refugees, and the government estimates that up to 1.3 million Syrians actually live in the country, between unregistered refugees and Syrians who were residents before the civil war. The vast majority—including 85 percent of those registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—live outside camps, primarily in cities, alongside poor Jordanians and migrant workers. The new work permit program is intended to wean refugees off what little aid exists; throughout the five-year Syrian refugee crisis, the UNHCR’s appeal has consistently been less than halfway funded. The program is also intended to enable Jordan to leverage aid and investment to stabilize a struggling economy and bolster domestic markets.

The influx of Syrians has helped and hurt the Jordanian economy, which had several pre-existing problems, such as high public debt as a percentage of GDP, dependency on foreign aid, and a high exchange rate of the Jordanian dinar. Many Syrian refugees brought significant capital with them at the beginning of the crisis, but much of that is exhausted, and those who own businesses face backlash for perceived crowding-out of Jordanian competitors. The Jordanian economy is projected to grow by 2.7 percent in 2016, below earlier projections of 3.5 percent and well below the 5 percent the government says is necessary to create sufficient jobs to match population growth and reduce unemployment.

The Syrian civil war, meanwhile, has adversely affected tourism, remittances from Jordanians living in Syria, and regional trade, particularly with Europe, and conflicts in both Iraq and Syria have cut off Jordan’s major land trading routes. Official unemployment hovers at above 13 percent, soaring to 30–40 percent among youth and 50 percent among women, creating a volatile mix of resentment between and within communities competing over scarce resources. Syrians and other migrant groups in particular suffer from these economic shortfalls, and as many as 85 percent live below the Jordanian poverty line.

The Jordanian government has announced targets ranging from 50,000 to 78,000 work permits distributed to refugees in 2016. It aims to create 1.2 million jobs (200,000 for Syrians and 1 million for Jordanians) in the coming years with the help of aid dollars and low-interest IMF loans, which are contingent on the success of the refugee work permit program. Yet only a few thousand Syrian refugees and their employers have actually received permits since the government announced the repeal of permit fees in May.

Syrians have been slow to apply: Approximately 74 percent of Syrian households received income from work in the informal economy in 2015, and many fail to see the benefit of registering when it means they will now need to pay taxes on income and go through the rigmarole of renewing the permits when they expire. Employers are also hesitant to register Syrian workers despite the fee waiver for permits, as registration entails paying a minimum wage and greater protections for workers, the lack of which many
employers see as an advantage of hiring Syrians. Without different incentives, it will likely prove difficult if not impossible to register Syrians already working informally rather than creating new jobs.

Government plans for job creation center on fostering growth in manufacturing, agriculture and construction, the three main sectors where refugees and other migrant workers are currently employed. King ‘Abdallah II announced a focus on the Special Economic Zones and other manufacturing districts outside the main urban areas. Such aspirations are not entirely misplaced, but with the high exchange rate of the dinar, Jordanian goods will require preferential treatment in major markets like the EU or United States if they are to compete with the output of countries with lower costs of production. The London Compact agreed upon in February offers just that in EU markets, but the terms of the deal are not yet final. In the meantime, it is likely that Syrian refugees working in manufacturing will only displace the migrant workers from South Asia who dominate the SEZs.

An overlooked area where investment could generate employment is urban infrastructure, in particular housing, water and transportation, all of which is stretched thin by population growth, mismanagement, disrepair and successive refugee crises. The urban housing market was in trouble long before the war in Syria. In 2008, King ‘Abdallah led a “Decent Housing for Decent Living” campaign, but construction did not keep up with population growth. Seven years later, the country still fell 48,000 units short of meeting demand. And housing has been sidelined in the response to the refugee influx, culminating in the government’s six-month suspension of urban shelter projects in 2015.

In 2014, UNESCO ranked Jordan the fourth driest country in the world, and the country suffers severe water shortages. More than 76 billion liters of extracted water—enough to meet the needs of 2.6 million people—are lost each year in aging, leaky pipes. Illegal wells siphon additional water from the official water grid. Water conservation, common among Jordanians, has not yet spread among Syrians and other foreign populations, fueling communal tensions. Local water maintenance bodies are extremely understaffed, with one area the size of Hawaii in northern Jordan served by only six engineers.

Transportation infrastructure in Jordan is also unable to meet demand, and one of the most oft-cited effects of the Syrian refugee crisis by native Jordanians is the increase in traffic. The lack of safe, reliable public transportation also keeps women and children at home, restricting their access to what little aid does exist in urban areas. There was no comprehensive, publicly available map of Amman bus and other transport routes until a citizen-initiated project created one in March.

The clear pressing needs aside, there are numerous fringe benefits to investing in improvements to infrastructure, including economic growth and an improved quality of life for all of Jordan’s urbanites. Perhaps most important at the moment, these investments could create thousands of job opportunities for Syrian refugees and Jordanians alike.

Yet the Jordan Response Plan 2016–2018 takes little note of this promise, speaking of upgrades to just over 11,000 housing units, and the construction of 100 units, by 2018, far short of the 48,000 required in 2015 alone. Transportation will receive the third lowest amount of funding by sector through 2018, surpassing only energy and justice. In reality, transportation will likely receive much less investment given funding shortfalls that will force organizations to focus on critical, life-sustaining aid. Improvements to water infrastructure are comparatively well-funded, but the focus on mega-projects such as desalination plants and pipelines leaves the central issues of leakage, management and consumption unaddressed.

The specific needs vary from place to place. In some districts, most buildings are connected to the official water grid, and leakage is not a big concern, but housing prices have skyrocketed and construction has not kept up. In others, local transportation is nonexistent but housing has stabilized. The imperative, therefore, is to shift the aid paradigm from a few large-scale projects to multitudes of smaller ones. It will not be easy.

Leveraging aid and loans for economic benefit does not need to be a zero-sum game. Investing more in urban infrastructure could lead to easier transportation to SEZs, increased income and demand for the goods they manufacture, and rising standards of living for Jordanians. Small-scale intervention on the neighborhood level may not be flashy, but it is crucial. Absent such investment, it is hard to see how Jordan will meet the goals for its work permit program. And refugees and Jordanians may see little, if any, improvement in their daily lives.

A third effort to improve legibility was a universal identification system. In the camp’s inaugural year, SRAD took the incoming refugees’ Syrian documents for safekeeping, but because the documents were not properly catalogued, they were sometimes lost and not immediately replaced with refugee identification papers. In 2013, only 80 to 85 percent of residents had the latter cards, leading to clashes with SRAD. By May 2014, however, camp management had made IDs available to 100 percent of residents. The identification system in 2015 is elaborate enough to distribute digital credit for shopping at the supermarket, an upgrade that has eased resource distribution and further improved resident-authority relations.
Employment and Community Policing

Still another example of effective coproduction is the increased number of refugees who are filling jobs in and around Zaatari. The non-profit International Relief and Development has coordinated the efforts of bilingual and multilingual refugees to help the UNHCR translate informational materials into Arabic, a task that once overwhelmed its capacities. Similarly, the Innovation and Planning Agency located 12 waste disposal experts among the refugees to plan and operate a recycling program, which would not have otherwise existed.

Other new job opportunities, in sectors such as water management and agriculture, give many residents a revenue stream and a sense of purpose. Refugees may work on neighboring farms or find jobs in border towns such as Mafraq, and a Cash for Work program inside the camp enables many residents to work for the multitude of aid organizations operating there. Employment is a win-win for residents and authorities, although the pay is low in Cash for Work and there is some lingering inequality and nepotism.

A final example of effective coproduction can be found in Zaatari’s community policing program. The community police station began operations in June 2014, and officially opened in February 2015. After receiving training in social outreach and verbal de-escalation skills, community police officers also began expanding foot patrols. These Jordanian officers network with Syrian street leaders and other community members to hear complaints and resolve conflicts between families and at schools or food distribution sites. The coproduction approach to security combines the street leaders’ breadth of awareness with the police officers’ depth of authority.

A domestic violence center was also founded in 2014, with a hotline to the police. As a result of these coproduced security measures, resident surveys from 2015 have indicated increased trust in the police, improved perceptions of safety, and a greater willingness to rely on police for responses to emergencies, administrative guidance and legal counsel. The gendarmerie and desert police are no longer regularly called in to maintain order through force.

The Regional Perspective

A look around Zaatari’s vicinity, however, shows that the governance challenge has not been completely met. In border cities such as Mafraq that have large Syrian refugee populations, tensions between the refugees and Jordanians are growing.

Smuggling—of everything from mundane items like clothing and sheep to drugs, weapons and people—remains a major problem. The smugglers are Jordanian and Syrian nationals; many belong to kinship groups that straddle the border. “Many of the residents in the northern border region were smugglers before the Syrian crisis, and they thrive in this new situation,” one aid organization’s safety officer noted in an interview. Beyond the flow of contraband and the price gouging that smuggling allows, problems also arise because “aid workers cannot operate in many areas in Mafraq because of fear of getting caught in the crossfire during raids by security forces on smugglers.”

Thefts in border cities have been on the rise since 2013, resulting in vigilante retaliation against the Syrians blamed for the crimes. Clashes between refugees and Jordanian citizens now occur about once a month in border cities. In June 2015, after a Jordanian in Mafraq murdered a Syrian refugee for alleged theft, the Jordanian’s entire extended family was forced to leave the city for the countryside for fear of retribution. The family is now waiting for a court decision to settle the issue.

The influx of refugees has also sharpened the competition over jobs, housing, water, food and even marriage partners. In Mafraq, there are now many highly skilled Syrians, former military officers, who take jobs that would otherwise go to Jordanians. Even without an official work permit, a Syrian can get hired through family connections, their employment kept covert through payment in cash or online transfer. Jordanians are apt to resent the Syrians for holding illicit employment at the same time that they qualify for refugee services, essentially “double-dipping” while low-income Jordanians are struggling.

Most of Jordan’s border cities were facing a shortage of low- and middle-income housing before the refugees arrived. The increased demand as the population grew means fewer available apartments at higher rents, and some Jordanians are having problems finding housing at all. Adding to the frustration, many international aid organizations focused on housing have explicit mandates to serve the needs of Syrian refugees, legally excluding projects for low-income Jordanians. These mandates create a sense of injustice and exacerbate antipathy between the refugees and their “hosts.”

Water was available around the clock in Mafraq before 2012, but building reservoirs are now only refilled once a week because of a spike in consumption after the refugees’ arrival. All residents, Jordanian and Syrian, are required to reduce their daily water use. There are also consequences for Jordanian agriculture: As greater human consumption pushes up water prices, the cost of irrigating crops and raising livestock will increase significantly, resulting in a proportional hike in local food prices. These major cost increases are a matter of when, not if.

Another long-term danger is that Zaatari’s wastewater is simply pumped into the surrounding desert. The sewage seeps through the soil to the confining layer of the earth and then spreads laterally. The flow through the porous Jordanian desert sand is quick enough that, by sometime in 2016, the wastewater will reach and begin to mix with the northern aquifer that supplies drinking water to Zaatari and Mafraq. Even if the contamination is contained, it is unlikely that the aquifer’s recharge rate will be adequate to meet the northern region’s demand. The only viable alternative would be hugely expensive vehicular or pipeline shipping of fresh water from aquifers in the southwest.

Of final concern are growing conflicts over a human resource: husbands and wives. Because a Syrian woman can...
gain citizenship, housing and a financial patron through marriage to a Jordanian man, such an “inter-national” marriage may be a highly valued objective (for parents if not also for their daughters). Marrying into a wealthy family (Jordanian, Gulf Arab or other) may enable a young Syrian woman to legally escape the refugee camps and find financial stability in the near term. Marrying outside one’s own community (tribe, nation, socioeconomic stratum and age group, among others) is stigmatized for many families, often creating jealousies and interfamilial tensions. Several cases of interfamilial feuds becoming violent have been reported in Jordan’s border cities.

The friction is not necessarily present everywhere. In the Badia, the rural, arid or semi-arid zone extending northeast from Mafraq, Syrian refugees have integrated relatively smoothly with Jordanian families. The rate of refugee migration to the Badia has been slower than in Zaatari, border areas and major cities. And many rural family ties cross the Jordanian-Syrian boundary, allowing for greater trust between Jordanian hosts and new Syrian arrivals. The Hashemite Fund for Badia Development’s environmental protection program deliberately hires half of its employees from the Syrian population and half from the Jordanian population to break down remaining mutual prejudice.

The Strategic Perspective

Like a real oasis, Zaatari was designed not as a permanent settlement, but as a place of respite in harsh surroundings. As crisis management yields to strategic planning, the question emerges: Where will the refugees go from here?

King ‘Abdallah II has begun to rethink the Syrian refugee challenge as a five-year issue (at least). He set this agenda with upper-level ministers at a summer 2015 gathering. This new perspective has shifted governance concerns from meeting basic needs for food, water and shelter toward creating a sustainable, integrated quality of life for the refugee population. Strategic planning must take account of the UNHCR data point that, worldwide, the average stay in a refugee camp lasts 17 years. And given the apparent durability of the Bashar al-Asad regime, coupled with the fact that most refugees are anti-regime and could very well face persecution upon return, the 17-year average could fall on the short end of the spectrum for Syrians in Jordan.

The historical record gives reason for concern as refugees shift from temporary, “situational” status to longer-term, “state-in-exile” status. Case studies show almost universally that as refugees spend more than five years in residence, the propensity for conflict with the host population and the host government increases. To avert this outcome, the legal status of refugees must be changed, in effect making them “residents” rather than “refugees,” expanding their civil liberties and opportunities and dispelling discontent. In the case of Syrians in Jordan, this legal and attitudinal transition will allow Jordan to empower the refugee population for social and economic gain, rather than simply holding them up as burdens to be borne.

The Future of Zaatari

As the strategic lens comes into focus, both Syrian residents of Zaatari and Jordanian authorities are beginning to replicate what transpired at the Palestinian Baqa’a camp on the edge of Amman. Baqa’a went from a temporary arrangement of tents to a functional “city” during the latter half of the twentieth century. Zaatari is already showing signs of this evolution, as tents have been replaced with semi-permanent trailers (“caravans”) and more durable infrastructure is being built. Further, residents are increasingly aware that their lives—and their children’s lives—will likely continue in Jordan, rather than back home in Syria.

As one Syrian living in Jordan wondered, “What will they do? Will they do to us like they did with the Palestinians—make us citizens, but without rights? Or will they give us freedom to own houses, to work and to travel?” This concern is widely expressed, and as it goes unanswered, the appeal of migrating to Europe, legally or otherwise, grows stronger despite the obstacles. More worrisome for both Syrian residents and Jordanian hosts is the memory of Black September 1970, when an actual civil war erupted between Jordanians and Palestinians, who were still largely seen as refugees. The Palestinian “issue” is a constant source of comparison for the expected protracted presence of Syrians who are refugees, and resident, in Jordan.

Although the UNHCR and SRAD have achieved many governance successes, the responsibility for managing refugee issues will increasingly rest with the Jordanian government alone. The UNHCR is “looking for exit strategies” and losing funding and personnel to emerging crises such as Nepal’s. At the same time, donors to aid organizations are losing focus on the Syrian conflict and there are fewer volunteers. Global players such as the United States and the European Union are also turning their attention to other conflicts, refusing to commit to long-term investment in the Syrian refugee crisis.

There is some reason for optimism. In 2014 and 2015, innovative residents and the authorities filled the profound governance gap in Zaatari’s founding years through an adaptive system of coproduction. This glimmer of hope suggests that Zaatari is as close to an oasis in the desert as could be hoped for. From strategic and regional perspectives, however, the future for refugees in Zaatari and across Jordan remains murky. More robust civil protections, economic opportunities and resource management will be needed to prevent conflict between residents and hosts from escalating further. There is an urgent need for consensus on a resilient strategic plan to keep the oasis from going dry.

(Endnotes)

1 For a more extensive academic definition of coproduction, see Elinor Ostrom. “Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy and Development,” World Development 24/6 (1996).
2 International Business Times, November 1, 2013.
4 According to a close associate of Kleinschmidt’s working in Jordan. Kleinschmidt will also document this event in a forthcoming book on Zaatari.
Mobilizing in Exile
Syrian Associational Life in Turkey and Lebanon
Killian Clarke and Gözde Güran

Huge questions face Syrians in exile in neighboring countries. When will the war end? When will they be able to go home? Should they put down roots elsewhere? One thing is sure: Syrians have not been idle in their temporary homes. They have shown surprising tenacity in forming networks of communal self-help.
The neighborhood of Narlıca sits on the outskirts of the small city of Antakya, Turkey. A spread of low-rise, brick-and-cement buildings separated by unpaved roads, Narlıca was a lightly populated working-class suburb prior to the outbreak of civil war across the border in Syria. Today, with that war dragging into its sixth year, the neighborhood has taken on a new identity as Antakya’s “little Syria.” The population has more than doubled, with Syrian residents now outnumbering Turks; most of the storefront signs are in Arabic; and newly opened schools teach the Syrian curriculum. Initially attractive for its affordable rents and proximity to downtown, Narlıca now offers its Syrian residents something less tangible, but no less significant—a sense of community and place.

But life in Narlıca can be difficult. Turkey hosts more Syrian refugees—almost 3 million—than any other country in the world, and over 80 percent of the Syrians reside in neighborhoods of Istanbul or in border towns like Antakya. But the Turkish government devotes far more resources, and the foreign media far more attention, to the 25 refugee camps in the country than to refugees living in urban areas. The international non-governmental organizations that have set up offices in Antakya tend to direct their efforts at relief inside Syria rather than refugee aid. With little access to welfare and unable to secure jobs, many of the first arrivals to Narlıca quickly fell on hard times.

Into this vacuum emerged the Narlıca Association. The initiative was formed during Ramadan of 2012, when community volunteers began preparing iftar dinners for needy families. These efforts soon expanded. Today, the Association is a thriving charity, with modest funding from Turkish and regional philanthropies that provides the refugees in Narlıca with a range of services including health care, food aid and vocational training. It is the only NGO operating in the district, which is home to the greatest concentration of Syrian refugees in the city.

The Narlıca Association is but one example of a widespread phenomenon: In towns and cities across the Middle East, informal initiatives—led and run by Syrians—have sprung up to serve Syrian communities in exile. In the southern Turkish provinces of Gaziantep, Urfa, Mersin and Kilis, and in the Istanbul neighborhood of Aksaray, thousands of organizations have formed. In Lebanon, the country that has taken in the second largest number of refugees, Syrian associational life is similarly vibrant, in many cases filling gaps left by a government that is both unwilling and unable to respond to the crisis.

There are now almost 5 million Syrians living as refugees in the Middle East. Despite movement on the diplomatic front in the spring of 2016, there is no long-term plan to end the war and rebuild the country, raising troubling questions about when the Syrians who have fled will be able to return home. In the face of these challenges, the grassroots efforts of Syrian activists in exile are a striking feat. Not only do these activists deliver aid and relief where it is absent or lacking, but they have also contributed to the reconstitution of Syrian community life, which is being woven into the fabric of cities across the Middle East.

Syrian Mobilization in Antakya

Antakya is the largest city in Hatay governorate. Historically part of Syria’s Aleppo province, Hatay has been a point of contention between Syria and Turkey since 1939, when it came under Turkish control through a referendum of sharply disputed validity. Syria still considers the area part of its territory, a conviction manifest on many Syrian maps. These political legacies are reflected in cross-border social and economic relations, and many Hatay residents of Arab descent still have relatives living in Aleppo and the Mediterranean coastal city of Ladhiquiya. With the surge of new Syrian residents fleeing the war, the joke in Antakya is that the city has effectively been ceded back to Syria.

The locals in Antakya trace their roots to both Anatolia and Syria, belong to various religious denominations, and speak both Arabic and Turkish, as well as some Armenian and Assyrian. Many residents proudly bring up this diversity as evidence of their city’s uniqueness, and indeed the pluralism is grafted onto the built environment of the city itself. In the southern part of town, Alawis and Christians of Arab descent live in blocks of modern medium-rise apartments. On the western bank of the river one finds a denser neighborhood of mostly Turkish and Arab Sunni Muslim working-class families. Today Syrians cluster in Narlıca.

The Narlıca Association was founded by Hamid, a chef and restaurateur from Ladhiquiya who left Syria in 2012. Because he knew how to cook for large numbers, Hamid was soon asked by a group of philanthropists to run a soup kitchen during Ramadan. Hamid happily agreed to make use of his own kitchen, where he began preparing daily dinners for 50 families living in the neighborhood. By the end of the month he was serving iftar to 350 families.

When the food drive ended, Hamid decided to hold a community meeting to gauge interest in an ongoing aid campaign. He posted flyers in Arabic at the main stores and mosques. About 250 Syrians attended this gathering; yet only 26 of them, most of whom had been middle-class professionals back in Syria, were convinced that the community could do much without outside help or subsidy. The cohort met regularly for two years at Hamid’s apartment, but when his Turkish neighbors complained, the landlord demanded that they stop. They then found an empty shop—with unpainted walls, no doors and no window frames—available for a modest 350 Turkish lira (approximately $115) per month. Despite their precarious

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finances, all 26 of the original volunteers chipped in to make the first month’s rent and renovated the building by hand. “We did everything on our own. I worked here in my overalls,” Hamid explained as he passed around photos of the project. “There weren’t any workers or foremen. We took care of everything.” When they finished, they had constructed functioning offices for what is now called the Narlıca Social Aid and Solidarity Association.

Over 80 percent of the Syrians in Turkey live in Istanbul or other cities.

The Association’s first task was to survey the households in Narlıca to assess the community’s needs. Teams of two volunteers went door to door in order to record basic information and issue ID cards to be used in aid distribution. After evaluating the data, the volunteers decided that, first and foremost, the neighborhood needed a health care facility. While Syrians have free access to state hospitals in Turkey, there is no hospital in Narlıca, and the smaller Turkish clinics that do exist are not authorized to treat Syrians. The trip to hospitals elsewhere in the city can be costly, and very few Turkish doctors can communicate in Arabic. The Association converted two of its offices into examination rooms and the storage space into an improvised pharmacy. But the group still needed to find doctors, as well as money for salaries, rent and medicine. For the former, Hamid returned to the household survey and identified all the physicians in the neighborhood. Two of them agreed to serve in the clinic. The medicine was donated by a Turkish health NGO. For the doctors’ salaries and the rent, Hamid contacted friends back in Ladhiqiyya, who promised to send $1,000 per month.

On this shaky foundation the Narlıca Health Center was able to see patients for seven months, at which point the Turkish authorities ordered it to close, on the grounds that it had not received government authorization. The clinic continued to operate in secret for three months but eventually shut down when the police showed up to seal the door. In the summer of 2015, the Association was told it could reopen the clinic on the condition that it hire at least one Turkish doctor, at a salary three times that of a Syrian doctor. Despite the steep additional costs, Hamid remains optimistic that the group will somehow manage to keep the clinic running.

The Narlıca enterprise exemplifies a pattern of Syrian organizing and welfare provision that has emerged, despite the odds, across southern Turkey. In nearby Reyhanlı, a town of 60,000, one international NGO has identified 47 grassroots Syrian initiatives, including health clinics, schools, orphanages and legal aid centers. In Yayladağı, home to 6,000 people, the governor estimates that there are 16 independent Syrian associations.

Not all of Syrian associational life in Turkey is focused on relief and aid. On a quiet residential street in downtown Antakya is a cultural center called Qamishlo House. Upon entering, visitors are welcomed by a map of Syria cut out of construction paper, surrounded by phrases celebrating the variegated ethno-religious composition of the country (“I am Syrian Christian,” “I am Syrian Arab,” “I am Syrian Kurdish”). In one corner is a stand displaying Syrian newspapers and magazines, mostly produced by the Syrian Network of Print Media based in Gaziantep and southern Turkey, and circulated both in Turkey and across the border in Syria. Colorful children’s artwork covers the opposite wall. The only permanent staff member is Farhad, who lives in the rear apartment with his wife. Though he used to live in Damascus, he is originally from Qamishlo, a Kurdish-majority town in eastern Syria after which the center is named. Farhad is also an amateur photographer and he often documents the center’s cultural events, including Saturday film screenings, concerts and daytime activities for children. He stresses the importance of building a gathering place for the Syrians in the city (Hamid from the Narlıca Association occasionally attends the events). “This is a place for all Syrians,” he explains.

Associational Life in Lebanon

Unlike in Turkey, the locus of Syrian associational life in Lebanon is the capital, Beirut, where many middle-class Damascenes relocated when the civil war escalated in 2012. Some of them had been activists in the 2001 “Damascus spring” movement and had participated in the peaceful anti-regime protests in the early days of the 2011 uprising. Others had been closer to the regime, participating in the NGOs connected to presidential spouse Asma al-Asad’s Syrian Trust for Development, before the uprising turned them into opposition supporters. In Beirut they congregated in neighborhoods like Jaytawi and Hamra, reconstituting networks that they had formed back in Syria and forging new ties with other young exiles. Prevented from working by Lebanon’s residency policies for Syrians, many of them devoted themselves to volunteerism, assisting poorer refugees who were often living in harrowing conditions in Beirut’s slums or makeshift rural camps.

A good example is Hisham, a young man from Damascus who moved to Beirut in 2012. Hisham had worked as a photographer in Syria but had trouble finding similar work in Lebanon. Shortly after he arrived, in early 2013, fighting intensified around Damascus, sending waves of Syrians fleeing across the border into Lebanon. Hisham and six Syrian friends he had met in Beirut started a Facebook
campaign to collect clothes and blankets, then drove to the isolated region of ‘Arsal, near the Syrian border, to distribute the donated goods. When they returned to Beirut they launched another campaign, then another. Eventually, they decided their group needed a name—they called it Syrian Eyes.

Syrian Eyes is different from most local and international NGOs in Lebanon. It has no formal registration status in Lebanon—in fact, Syrians are prohibited from registering their own organizations. It is essentially a network of Syrian and Lebanese volunteers who come together to execute projects when they have the time or resources to spare. Hisham is one of the few full-time members. They receive a little funding from a group of Syrian women living in Germany, and occasionally they partner with an international or Lebanese NGO for a specific effort.

Like the Narlıca Association, Syrian Eyes is also different in its philosophy toward aid and welfare. In Lebanon, the government has deliberately taken a hands-off approach to the refugee crisis, outsourcing most of the relief work to the UN and its partners, who have created a byzantine system whereby responsibilities are divided up by sector and region. The problems are exacerbated by the dispersed settlement patterns that the Lebanese government has promoted. Given Lebanon’s fraught history with Palestinian refugee camps, the government has actively prevented Syrian refugees from concentrating too heavily in any one place, meaning that thousands of small encampments are sprinkled across the countryside of the north and the Bekaa Valley. While most large NGOs have been charged with providing services to tens or hundreds of these settlements, the Syrian Eyes founders quickly realized that they could not hope to supply such breadth of services. So instead they decided to invest in just one settlement.

Hisham and his colleagues selected a fast-growing camp in the Bekaa, which they noticed had been neglected by the international NGOs. They began visiting the place regularly, getting to know the residents and local leaders. They opened a community center, which they used to hold meetings, hand out aid, host events, and offer art classes and performances for the children. Eventually, members of the settlement came to them with their own idea: to build a small bakery that could be a source of both bread and income for the camp members. The bakery was so successful that other NGOs replicated it in nearby settlements.

According to Hisham, this level of engagement with a single refugee settlement is rare: “I admit we have a special relation with the camp. In the beginning, even if we didn’t have money or had nothing to distribute, we would still go to the camp. We didn’t have the money to do the center right away. So we would go and give a party; we would stay there for three days; we slept at people’s tents. Other NGOs don’t try to do that. And you hear it from Syrians in

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“Long before the battle for Qasr al-Nil bridge erupted, MERIP understood and analyzed the forces that would start a revolution.”

—Anthony Shadid
the camp: “They don’t know us. They don’t know anything about us.”

Other Syrian associations in Beirut have more willingly embraced the professionalized Western NGO model, but many of them manage to retain a grassroots spirit. Basma and Zaytuna (Smiles and Olives), headquartered in the Shatila refugee camp, is a good example. One of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Shatila is almost entirely enveloped by the city. With its cheap rents, it began attracting Syrian migrants shortly after the start of the war and its population has now doubled to roughly 40,000. Basma and Zaytuna started out with two friends (one a Jesuit priest from Aleppo, the other a teacher from Damascus) handing out aid in Shatila, where needs were particularly high. They learned that a major concern for Syrians in the camp was the lack of employment options for women, many of whom had lost their husbands in the war and had to feed their families on their own. So the two volunteers founded a workshop, where women could make handicrafts that the NGO would sell in local markets. Today the NGO is officially registered (though the registration had to be done under the name of Lebanese partners), and runs a two-building community center in Shatila as well as three smaller centers in the north and the Bekaa. It has 110 full-time staff and tens of programs, and thousands of Palestinian and Syrian receive its aid. It remains the only NGO working in Shatila.

Syrian Eyes and Basma and Zaytuna often collaborate with other Syrian or Syrian-Lebanese NGOs based in Beirut but with operations across the country. Basma and Zaytuna,
Occasionally these NGOs engage in politics, though they must be careful not to antagonize the Lebanese authorities, who could easily put an end to their activities. In early 2015, after the Lebanese government passed a law severely limiting the UN’s ability to register new refugees, 17 Syrian and Lebanese NGOs signed a petition raising objections.2

The NGOs that spearheaded the petition represent another current of Syrian associational life in Lebanon, one concerned with the rights and duties of citizens in the Syria they envision for tomorrow. According to a volunteer at the Syrian League for Citizenship, which convenes workshops and training sessions and publishes booklets, international and Lebanese NGOs sometimes criticize such efforts as a waste of time. “Of course we think relief is important,” the activist says, “but you have to work on other issues in parallel. Because, ultimately, this war will end. It will stop. And when it does the people will come back to their homes and you need to rebuild this country. How will we do that? That is what we’re focused on; we want to build good future citizens.”

A similar ethos infuses the work of most of the Syrian NGOs, even those dedicated to traditional relief. In 2015, for example, Syrian Eyes ran a project called Syria in Mind.3 In partnership with a Lebanese NGO, the Syrian Eyes volunteers traveled around Lebanon to teach children in camps about their heritage. “Many of them aren’t linked to Syria anymore. Some of them can’t remember it,” Hisham explains. “So we sit the whole day on a map of Syria—literally to be on Syria. We have a small car that moves along the map, which gives them the space to think and imagine: ‘We are going from the mountains to the beach in Ladhiqiyya and then to the Euphrates.’”

**Institutional and Political Challenges**

Even in places where they are welcomed, refugees who seek to organize themselves must overcome significant hurdles. Experiences of violence, dispossession and trauma, coupled with a lack of resources and often tenuous legal status, make the task of forming new associations daunting. But Syrians have also confronted a thicket of additional barriers presented by their host countries’ political and institutional environments.

The most basic set of challenges are legal. In Lebanon, where Syrians cannot officially register organizations, they must register as a Lebanese organization (which requires Lebanese partners), register in a third country or eschew formal registration. But without formal registration even routine activities become near impossible. As one activist put it, “How am I supposed to operate an NGO when I can’t even open a bank account?” Even in Turkey, where Syrians are granted more legal rights and where their residency status is less uncertain, government regulations sometimes force NGOs to shut down. The reason the Narnica Association’s clinic never registered with Turkish authorities was that it could not afford to hire the Turkish doctor required by the government’s regulations.

Sometimes activists face overt hostility from members of host communities who feel threatened by the rising number of Syrians in their neighborhoods. Qamishlo House, for instance, used to operate a second center in another district of Antakya, until the founder showed up one morning to find the windows shattered. “In Turkey, this is how it is,” he shrugged. “If a Turkish person complains to the police about a Syrian, they arrest the Syrian. And if a Syrian complains about a Turkish person, they also arrest the Syrian.” In Lebanon, the state’s antagonism toward Syrians is, if anything, more explicit. The Lebanese government has been accused of trying to make the country as inhospitable as possible for Syrians, in hopes of encouraging them to return to Syria, move to another Middle Eastern country or attempt one of the dangerous migration routes...
to Europe. One method is the onerous, ever shifting residency rules—for example, requiring Syrians to find Lebanese sponsors or requiring that they pay high fees to renew temporary permits every six months. An adviser to the Lebanese interior minister explained that police will often detain Syrians without residency permits for four hours, release them and then rearrest them days later. “It’s a bit nonsensical,” he admitted, “but we have to enforce the law.” The strategy seems to be working, at least partly, as many Syrians with the means to do so have left Lebanon for other countries. These departures have also taken a toll on the Syrian NGOs: Of the seven founders of Syrian Eyes, only three remain in Lebanon—the rest now live in Germany or Sweden.

Funding is another quandary. Activists quickly burn through their own savings, as well as donations from friends and neighbors, and then must seek out third-party assistance. But the donor landscape in each host country differs markedly. In Lebanon, where there is a flourishing civil society and a long history of international NGO work, Syrians are more likely to find outside support. But Turkey has less contemporary experience with humanitarian crisis and war and so, paradoxically, its independent philanthropic sector is less well developed than Lebanon’s. Syrian groups may therefore go directly to the government or, more frequently, to one of a handful of quasi-governmental organizations involved in relief. The Narlıca Association, for example, has received monies from charities like IHH, Yeryüzü Doktorları, Deniz Feneri Derneği and Kimse Yok Mu, all four of which have ties to the Turkish government.

Of all the actors responding to the refugee crisis, international NGOs (INGOs) have perhaps the most complex relationship with Syrian activists. In both Lebanon and Turkey, INGOs provide services to refugees, though in Lebanon their role is far more central. In some cases, Syrian initiatives have received sizable grants from INGOs. The Danish Refugee Council gave funds to the Narlıca Association to pay for iftar meals and refurbish a playground in the district, and UNICEF funded Syrian Eyes’ Syria in Mind program. But Syrian activists have also been frustrated by the ways in which INGOs, without meaning to, may undermine their efforts. In 2014 the founder of Basma and Zaytuna, Fadi Hallisso, wrote that “instead of empowering Syrian civil society and helping it to build its capacity, the aid community is rendering us more fragile,” and pleaded with INGOs to think more carefully about the unintended consequences of their activities.\footnote{INGOs eager to hire local Syrians pluck away staff or volunteers from Syrian associations. For example, Narlıca’s data analyst quit to join a prominent INGO operating in Antakya that offered him higher pay (though still far below the salaries of international staff). Syrians often also resent the implicit hierarchies that exist between international and Syrian NGOs. One activist told a story of a partnership between his NGO and an INGO funder that went sour when the INGO removed the overhead costs from their proposed budget. “It’s fine for them to budget in huge overhead—for cars, hotels and restaurants, and photographers—but for Syrian and local NGOs no overhead is allowed.” Moreover, INGO grants often come with strings attached, particularly reporting requirements that force Syrian NGOs to divert time and energy from their core activities. Some argue that the pressure to adopt the model of the bureaucratic Western NGO saps Syrian associations of the grassroots ties and flexibility that made them so effective in the first place. Still, most activists admit that without Western funding their initiatives would fizzle out, and so the collaboration continues despite the tensions.}

Perhaps the biggest question facing Syrians in exile is the inherent uncertainty about the future: When will the war end? When will return be possible? Should they put down roots in their new Middle Eastern homes, attempt the dangerous crossing to Europe or hold out hope of going back to Syria?

There are no good answers. But one thing is sure: Syrians have not remained idle in their temporary homes. Despite tremendous needs and significant structural barriers, the Syrians who have settled in cities across the region are demonstrating surprising resilience and tenacity in forming networks of communal self-help. These efforts should not be romanticized or overstated, of course; the Syrians’ circumstances remain dire. But in contrast to humanitarian caricatures of refugees as passive victims in need of international care, Syrians are fighting to keep their communities intact and retain their dignity.

Regardless of what the future holds in store, most actors involved in the refugee crisis response have an interest in seeing these initiatives succeed. The international aid community is already tiring of the crisis, and money has begun to dry up. International NGOs are cutting back operations, trimming staff and closing offices. But the number of Syrians is not diminishing—and the task of providing for them will be left to host states, local NGOs and their own community organizations. Building these communities’ strength will allow them to better support themselves in exile and, eventually, contribute to rebuilding a post-war Syria.

\section*{Endnotes}

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this article are from interviews conducted by the authors in Lebanon and Turkey in the summer of 2015. All names of interviewees have been changed.


3 See more at: https://uniceflebanon.exposure.co/syria-in-mind-project.

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Growing Up in Wartime
Images of Refugee Children’s Education in Syrian Television Drama

Hayden Bates and Rebecca Joubin

For years prior to the March 2011 uprising in Syria, writers of the sketch comedy series Buq’at Daw’ (Spotlight) used symbolism and wordplay to mount a not-so-subtle challenge to the regime on state television. In a 2002 skit, written by Samir al-Barqawi and directed by Layth Hajju, a teacher chalks tumuh (ambition) on the board and asks his pupils to tell him what theirs might be. One boy, Sa’id, duly jots down his life goal on a piece of...
paper. The camera never shows what the child has written, but the teacher is so frightened by what he sees that he calls in the school’s principal to deal with the “disaster.” The boy’s father is summoned, and he is likewise terrified. “I’ll do everything in my power to erase this idea from my mind,” he tells the principal. “By the time he returns to school, he’ll have no more ambition left. I’ll turn him back into an ordinary citizen.” At home he tears up Sa’id’s books, and blocks Al Jazeera and other television channels that cover politics. The boy comes back a week later to tell his teacher, “I’m your servant. I’ll act as you wish.” What does he want to be in the future now? “I don’t want to become anything. My head is empty like this paper.” The adults clap and shake hands, but tears of regret fill the father’s eyes.

The crushing of dreams in school was a recurring theme in Syrian television and film for decades under the Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad regimes. The character of the teacher often stood in for the coercive state apparatus—if not the dictator himself. Cultural producers found ways to tell the harsh truth: Primary and secondary schools were engines of mass literacy but also factories of political and ideological discipline that stifled critical thinking. Another common thread in storylines was the corrosive effect of corruption: A university degree had little worth as a means of social advancement for anyone who was not already well connected with the regime or the business elite.

In a much different way, the quality of education has remained a major trope of Syrian television dramas since the uprising, the brutal regime reprisals and the subsequent civil war. Some narratives on state television now focus on how a war that was forced upon the regime has dismantled a school system that was a source of national pride and a ticket to a decent, dignified life for the country’s youth. Writers and directors of all political persuasions—in serials airing inside and outside Syria—use the plight of refugee children in particular to make claims about who or what is responsible for the Syrian catastrophe and what the future will bring. The regime-sympathizing dramas are apt to cast the schoolchild as a beacon of resilience that holds out the promise of putting the nation back together, once it is rid of certain “undesirable” social elements. Others have darker visions. The best and most nuanced serials are those that demystify rather than “other” the experience of growing up in wartime.

Education Before and After

The Syrian conflict has hurt children badly and disproportionately. Untold tens of thousands of children are among the war dead, and normal life has been completely disrupted for millions more. Before the fighting began, according to UNICEF, an estimated 97 percent of Syrian children attended primary school and 67 percent secondary school. The corresponding literacy rates of 90 percent for both men and women equaled those of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and well surpassed those of Egypt and Iraq. Today, by contrast, many displaced Syrians aged 6–17 are receiving no formal education at all. A 2013 UNICEF report found that 2.2 million children displaced within Syria were not attending school. Thousands of schools have been destroyed or refashioned into shelters for displaced persons, military staging grounds or detention centers. A 15-year old girl displaced from Aleppo, where the fighting has been particularly heavy, told UNICEF reporters that her peers feared walking to school because of snipers. With some combatants using rape as a “weapon of war,” parents are increasingly reluctant to allow daughters to go to school, exacerbating gender inequities.

About half of the Syrian refugees outside the country, moreover, are under 18. According to the same 2013 UNICEF report, about a half-million of these youngsters are not in school, either. Studies suggest that enrollment rates in the closest host countries may be as low as 20 percent in Lebanon and 30 percent in Turkey (though considerably higher in Jordan). Even if refugee children have legal access to education, they are often discouraged from attending by language barriers (in Turkey), confusing regulations and economic hardship. Their parents often cannot obtain work permits or earn fair wages, making the families dependent on supplemental income from child labor. There are many reports of girls entering into early marriages to ease the family’s economic burden. Even when enrolled, Syrian refugee children are more likely than their non-refugee peers to receive poor grades or drop out, as they cannot overcome the disruption of their education, particularly not when studying a new curriculum in a foreign language.

Children displaced by the conflict are often suffering emotionally as well. In 2014, for example, UNICEF reported that nearly one third of the children living in Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp were living in fear of kidnapping or death. Evidence of trauma includes nightmares, bedwetting, crying, screaming and withdrawal. The stress associated with refugee flight may also be contributing to increased rates of familial violence. The school setting is not necessarily safe, either, as refugee youth report discrimination, bullying by local youth and both physical and verbal abuse in schools.

UN agencies and international NGOs collect and recite these grim statistics as a call to humanitarian action on the part of donor countries. The underlying message is

Dramas broadcast on Syrian state television often “other” the refugees.
that donor nations must invest adequately in educational infrastructure for refugees—or else. In the words of one UNICEF report: “Despite all that they have suffered, Syria’s children still find a reason for hope. Most cherish the belief that one day they will return to a peaceful Syria, to rekindle old friendships and revive old dreams.” The UNICEF authors continued: “But their resilience is being tested to the limit.... The trap of anguish, sorrow and futility is claiming a whole generation of young Syrians. They sense their future is under siege.”

A Human Rights Watch report quoted Shaza Barakat, a Syrian educator in Istanbul, spelling out the consequences: “If a child doesn’t go to school, it will create big problems in the future—they will end up on the streets, or go back to Syria to die fighting, or be radicalized into extremists, or die in the ocean trying to reach Europe.” (Barakat’s own son died fighting for the rebels.)

Narratives of “Othering”

The interruption of education by war and refugee flight is a regular subject of dramas on state television since the uprising. In most depictions, which deny the refugees agency, there is an evident sympathy for the regime’s way of seeing things: Prior to the war, Syrian parents were able to educate their children properly and all was well. Syrians who have fled the fighting are in some way “other” (and, by implication, less) than those who have stayed behind. There is now nostalgia on state television for the function of schooling as a source of social order, where once there was critique. An illustrative example is the aforementioned Buq’at Daw’, which went off the air in 2013, and reappeared in 2014 with its former critical edge considerably dulled. The writer Hazim Sulayman’s skit “Mr. Najib” opens with scenes of youngsters playing near dilapidated tents, UN cars in the background, and then a teacher appears attempting to control his classroom. At the sound of a supply truck his students run pell-mell outside. The teacher, Najib, is horrified—what if someone had posted pictures of the chaos on the Internet? Take turns, he instructs the children. Later, two Syrian war profiteers approach Najib with a plan to distribute goods in the camp. At first the teacher refuses, but the men insist. It turns out that Najib, whose name means “pure” in Arabic, is easily corrupted. Still later, he wants to bring in young filmmakers to document the camp’s misery in order to arouse pity and attract donations from outsiders. The sketch clearly implies that both the refugees and those offering them support are less than honorable.

Other dramas amplify a second “othering” component of regime narratives about the refugees—that they are uniquely vulnerable to the predations and manipulations of Sunni Muslim fundamentalists. It is commonly agreed among Syrian cultural producers that Taht Sama’ al-Watan (Under the Nation’s Sky), directed by Najdat Anzour, propagates such ideas, which aim to stoke sectarian fears. This 2013
miniseries is composed of three-episode stories that deal directly with what Anzour calls the *azma* (crisis).

The installment “‘Aziza from Baba ‘Amr,” written by Hala Diab and directed by Anzour, is set in the sprawling Zaatari camp in Jordan. The Sunni sheikhs there are portrayed as lascivious hypocrites who encourage parents to sell their teenage girls into early marriage in order to protect them. The leading sheikh, indeed, proclaims that marrying raped girls is an act of jihad. The story of “‘Aziza from Baba ‘Amr” centers on Hanan, a 15-year old girl from a war-ravaged neighborhood of Homs who yearns to return to Syria and complete her studies. When camp gossip spreads that Hanan has been raped, she insists the rumor is false. But her father, fearful of scandal, marries her to Yusuf, who rapes and impregnates his young bride on the wedding night and then abandons her in an Amman hotel. Afterward a woman who prostitutes teenage girls takes in Hanan and tries to sell her off to some men, one of whom turns out to be the same Yusuf. But there is a glimmer of hope: Hanan escapes and finds her way to an Amman social worker who says that since her marriage was improper, she has the right to abort her pregnancy and pursue her education in Jordan. Hanan’s tale ends here—with the implication that education will empower her and that personal resilience will be her redemption. There is no hint of the frustrations so commonly encountered by aspiring young professionals in the serials of the pre-uprising era nor, for that matter, of any legitimate grievance that might spark a popular revolt.

**A Lost Generation**

The theme of idle refugee children imperiled by Islamic extremism also runs through *Ghadan Naltaqi* (Tomorrow We Shall Meet, 2015), written by Iyad Shammat, based in
Lebanon, and airing on LDC and Abu Dhabi TV. *Ghadan Naltaqi* adopts what could be seen as a neutral stance toward the conflict: The main storyline follows two brothers, Mahmoud and Jabir, as well as Warda, the woman who loves the former and is loved by the latter. Jabir is pro-regime and Mahmoud is with the opposition. At one point the brothers fight over Warda, causing a fire that destroys her apartment. The idea is that both sides have burned down Syria.

Most of the action in *Ghadan Naltaqi* occurs in a run-down apartment complex in Beirut owned by an elderly Syrian named Abu Riyad. The refugees there are struggling to survive while doing all they can to leave for Europe. The miniseries breaks new ground in technique, with its haunting close-ups of refugees waiting and waiting for a new life to begin. None of the children in the complex are in school. In an early scene, Abu Riyad scatters the kids playing outside, before arranging for a minibus to take them to odd jobs in the city. Better they work, he says, than roam the streets.

The love triangle storyline also features a young boy out of school, Mazin, whom Warda has taken in. Both of Mazin’s parents have been killed, and he has escaped from a camp where his uncle repeatedly beat him. Warda takes the boy to the hospital to recover from the typhoid fever he contracted on the run. She also goes to the camp to retrieve the identity papers he needs to attend school, but the abusive uncle rebuffs her. Mazin asks over and over for lessons, so Jabir begins to tutor him. But this arrangement ends when Warda refuses Jabir’s advances; she asks her beau Mahmoud to take up the tutoring task though he is less talented than his brother. Thus the love triangle—symbolizing the warring parties at home—impedes the education of the young generation of Syrians in exile.

The miniseries also offers a consistently negative portrayal of Islam. The religious conservative Abu Riyad hits the small boys if he sees them looking at women, as does his tenant Abu ‘Abduh, who also pops the boys’ soccer ball, which he says resembles the Satan of the West. Abu ‘Abduh constantly enjoins his son Jamal to pray. In the end, Jamal...
joins ISIS, and when his father searches for him in the north, he is beheaded. Ghadan Natlaqi thus reinforces the narrative of a lost generation of refugee children longing for education, but lacking the means, putting them in danger of succumbing to religious fanaticism.

**Growing Up in Wartime**

During the first week of December 2012, Layth Hajju, now based in Dubai, began filming *Sa-Na'ud Ba'da Qalil* (We Will Return Soon), produced by Klaket and O3 Production, and broadcast on the pan-Arab channels LBC and MBC during Ramadan of 2013. Inspired by Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore’s 1990 movie *Everybody’s Fine,* Lebanon-based screenwriter Rafi Wahbi aspired to capture the human suffering on all sides of the conflict, while on the surface remaining neutral. According to the noted television editor Iyad Shihab Ahmad, Wahbi represents Syrian intellectuals who do not directly announce their opposition to the regime, but relay their political opinions via symbol and metaphor. (Openly pro-opposition cultural producers have an increasingly hard time securing funding for their projects.)

The story of *Sa-Na’ud Ba’da Qalil* commences with the widowed Najib, who lives in the Old City of Damascus, displaying that he is in denial about the depth of the disaster in Syria even as explosions reverberate in the background. During the first third of the miniseries, as Najib describes the “perfect” lives of his children, their decidedly imperfect lives unfold before the viewers.

One son, Karim, has left for Lebanon with his wife and child, but his wife, Lina, pines for home. When the story opens she complains to her husband that it is getting more and more difficult to put their son Shadi, 6, to sleep. The boy is traumatized by the war and insists on sleeping between his parents. Karim chides Lina for crying in front of Shadi and for referring to their family as *nuzub* (refugees)—he reminds her that they have it much better than so many Syrians living in tents. Education is a central issue: Lina confides in her brother-in-law that the family left Syria since it had become harder to get Shadi safely to school. Meanwhile, Karim worries that his son will not go to the school bus stop unaccompanied by his parents, because a friend told him that many Syrians have been kidnapped. Karim asks Lina to speak to the school principal, but, when she does, she is told the school officials cannot do anything unless the kids talk that way in front of a teacher. The parents resign themselves to raising a fearful child who has trouble concentrating in class. Karim frets about his son’s masculinity.

Karim becomes a news anchor and has an affair with Reem, a colleague, for reasons of career advancement. With his wife gone to visit her family in Syria, Karim spends the evenings with his lover and comes home late. At one point, Shadi sees his father together with Reem at the doorstep. Lina returns, deploring the fact that the regime has erected roadblocks all over the capital. But when Shadi eventually tells his mother what he saw, Lina leaves Karim and heads back to Damascus. Whatever happens back home, she says, is better than her son seeing his father betray his mother.

*Sa-Na’ud Ba’da Qalil* concludes with the family patriarch Najib lying alone in the hospital. The viewer sees shots of fires burning near his shop in Old Damascus, as regime officials announce on the radio that the great enemy of the Syrian people, Israel, has bombed a research center. The ending powerfully illustrates how the regime is determined that Syrians remain in denial amid the civil war, to the extent of cranking out such transparent nationalist propaganda. The father figure Najib represents a generation of Syrians who knew the government was lying but merely acted as if they believed in order to survive.

Yet the storyline of Najib’s grandson offers no neat and sentimental counterpoint to the tragedy of the older generation. Shadi is not empowered by the mere act of attending school, as the regime-sympathizing narratives would have it, nor are his travails sensationalized with references to ISIS or religious extremism. His problems at school are what one would expect in a child growing up amid war and forced displacement. *Sa-Na’ud Ba’da Qalil* pays its characters and its audience the respect of putting the normal fears of a child under abnormal stress on a par with the fears of adults.

**Endnotes**

3. Ibid.
15. Rebecca Joubin, “‘The Politics of the Qahdabya (Tough Man) and the Changing Father Figure in Syrian Television Drama,’” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 2/1 (March 2016), p. 61.
On a bright and sunny day in early April, outside a terminal at what was once the Ellinikon International Airport in Athens, I listened as Javad, 16, told the story of the second refugee flight of his life. Javad (not his real name) is a member of the Hazara ethnic group and originally hails from the Baghlan province of Afghanistan. His family fled his home country during the rule of the Taliban, who infamously targeted the Hazaras for massacre, in part because most Hazaras are Persian-speaking Shi’a. They escaped to Iran, where they lived in relative safety, but not dignity, as Afghans often face the exploitation of Iranian employers and the discrimination of the government. Life in Iran was still preferable, however, to returning to Afghanistan, where the Taliban are resurgent in many provinces, including Baghlan.

What led Javad to flee Iran was fear of forcible conscription by the government to fight on the side of the regime in Syria. Trying to spare their sons this fate, and following news of refugees traveling via Turkey to Europe and finding protection there, Javad’s family mustered what money they had and borrowed some more to pay for him and his older brother to make the journey. His brother was sent first, and Javad had to wait nearly two months before his family could collect the funds to send him as well. As his bad luck
would have it, the delay meant that Javad arrived on the Greek island of Lesvos within days of a March 18 agreement between the European Union and Turkey, which effectively halted his trip and consigned him to a large tent outside the old Ellinikon terminal.

The airport ceased functioning in 2001, and lay in disuse for over a decade. Only in March did it begin to serve as a makeshift camp housing refugees and migrants. At Ellinikon, some 2,000 refugees—the camp manager refused to disclose the exact number—were living in a life in limbo, uncertain what the future holds. Most are Afghans. Even before the current “migration crisis,” Greece was heavily criticized, not only by international human rights organizations, but also by other EU members states, for the conditions in its camps. In 2011, in fact, the European Court of Human Rights held that the camps were so crowded, dangerous and poorly maintained that to return asylum seekers to Greece would constitute a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. The conditions in which migrants and asylum seekers are now being forced to live in Greece are even more degrading—Amnesty International uses the terms “dire” and “appalling.”

Javad shares his tent with dozens of men, all sleeping on blankets on the floor. The shelter is designated for single males, and Javad was moved into it along with a group of other boys under 18 traveling without family. But men over the age of 18 were also placed there—in contravention of regulations concerning the detention and housing of unaccompanied minors. Everyone I spoke to at Ellinikon, whether they were staying in tents or inside the buildings, complained about the inadequate food, sanitation and medical care. Numerous children were suffering from colds and fevers.

Many of the refugees were nonetheless prepared to endure these conditions, if they knew that their stay would be temporary. Almost everyone I spoke to, whether at Ellinikon, or in other places around Athens housing asylum seekers, had traveled to Greece from Turkey with the intention of moving onward. No one planned to remain in Greece, a country undergoing a major economic crisis.

In the summer and fall of 2015, it was possible to move on. International conventions to which European countries are signatory forbid refoulement—the sending back of persons to a country where they fear persecution, or from which they could be sent back to a country in which they fear persecution. Those claiming asylum are entitled to have their case heard. In July 2015, Germany became the first of several EU countries to temporarily suspend the Dublin regulations, which require would-be refugees to register and seek asylum in the first EU country in which they arrive. Hundreds of thousands of people crossing into Greece could continue their journey—usually to Germany or Sweden, the top two destinations.

But the political tide turned, and as fall turned to winter those countries closed their doors. So did transit countries like Hungary and Serbia, which did not want to be “stuck” with the refugees. The Dublin regulations were reinstated. Greece was left having to deal with a seemingly unending flow of migrants and asylum seekers.

The EU-Turkey deal of March 18 is meant to discourage people from taking the Greek route into Europe. It allows Greece to return to Turkey any migrant arriving “illegally” after March 20, 2016. The principle of non-refoulement still applies: To avoid retracing their steps to Turkey, all those arriving in Greece must apply and be approved for asylum there. But Greece’s asylum system is badly overburdened, and it is clear the country does not have the means to absorb all of the refugees.

The pact makes special provisions for Syrians, stipulating a “swap” of sorts—for every Syrian who is sent back to Turkey, one may be resettled from Turkey to the EU. Presumably, the Syrian being returned is one who does not, strictly speaking, meet the definition of a refugee (it is a fallacy to assume that all persons who flee a conflict are refugees as contemplated by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees). In addition, Turkey has agreed to clamp down on illegal migration across its sea and land borders. The deal comes with financial incentives for Turkey and liberalization of EU visas for Turkish citizens.

Some asylum seekers in Greece will still be able to move on to other EU countries. Under a previous European Council decision, those nationalities whose asylum applications have over a 75 percent success rate (according to Eurostat statistics) can apply for relocation from Greece. At the moment, that essentially means that Eritreans, Iraqis and Syrians are eligible. Just over 900 of the 64,000-plus applicants have been relocated since September 2015.

But neither the “swap” nor the relocation procedures apply to Afghans. So someone like Javad must either seek and be granted asylum in Greece or be sent back to Turkey. Afghans are often rejected for asylum since they are deemed first and foremost to be “economic migrants” and not “political refugees.” This categorical exclusion runs counter to fundamental notions of fairness and the right to have one’s case assessed on an individual basis. It seems particularly unfair to Afghans, whose country has known little but war since 1979.

Since the EU-Turkey deal, arrivals in Greece have fallen significantly. More than 50,000 refugees and migrants “trapped” in Greece are gradually being moved from places like Piraeus and the village of Idomeni to official refugee camps administered by the Greek authorities. Those who are seeking asylum in Greece, asking to be reunited with family members in other EU countries, or hoping to apply for internal relocation must wait while the slow process grinds on.

The EU-Turkey deal, the Dublin regulations and, indeed, the international refugee regime itself are incapable of addressing the unprecedented forced displacement in today’s world. The mentality that labels this phenomenon a “migration crisis” for Europe neglects to consider the reality that forced displacement, for both political and economic reasons (which are related, despite all attempts by policymakers to separate the two), will continue for the foreseeable future.
Waiting to collect cooking gas rations, Western Sahara, 2011.

North Africa’s Invisible Refugees

Alice Wilson

It is December 2014, and on a chilly desert night in a refugee camp, a family sits in a circle inside their tent. Each family member wraps as much of his or her person as possible in a shared blanket. The mother, Almuadala, is making tea on a charcoal furnace. All are listening to Mohamad Fadel, the father, who is telling the story of how he identified the body of his father, who was killed in the conflict that caused thousands of families like this one to become refugees forty years ago. Mohamad Fadel was taken to an unmarked collective grave, just discovered in 2013. There he was able to recognize his father from the clothes he had been wearing the last time that Mohamad Fadel saw him alive.

At a time of great public attention to refugees displaced by violent conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, refugees like Mohamad Fadel, Almuadala and their family

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know that the window of visibility will not be open indefinitely—nor to all. They are Sahrawis, from the disputed territory of Western Sahara in North Africa. Moroccan forces killed Mohamad Fadel’s father when Morocco partially annexed Western Sahara in 1976. Thousands of Sahrawi families fled to Algeria, where they have lived in camps governed by the liberation movement for Western Sahara, the POLISARIO Front. For over three decades, the sands obscured the two graves that contained Mohamad Fadel’s father and seven companions. Over the course of four decades in exile, as the Western Sahara conflict has become synonymous with stalemate, political-economic factors arguably even harder to dislodge than the desert have tended to obscure Sahrawis as refugees in the international arena.

Many Sahrawis are exasperated at the seeming invisibility of Western Sahara in international political and media circles. They bemoan the lack of progress toward self-determination for the people of Western Sahara (as mandated in long-standing UN calls for the decolonization of this former Spanish colony), as well as the perceived neglect of developments on the ground. Events such as Sahrawis’ protests on the cusp of the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the October 2013 destruction by flooding of some 17,000 refugee homes and the food stocks of some 85,000 people, remain little known outside specialist circles. The exception to date is the 2009 hunger strike of Sahrawi human rights activist Aminetou Haidar, which led to the intervention of the United States in favor of Haidar’s readmission to the Moroccan-controlled zone of Western Sahara by the Moroccan authorities who had expelled her.

A Visit from the UN Secretary-General

Amid the frustration of Sahrawi appetites for international visibility, the March 5, 2016 visit of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to the Sahrawi refugee camps sparked both hopes for Sahrawis and controversy in diplomatic circles. In a subsequent address, Moon spoke of the overwhelming turnout of Sahrawi refugees to greet him: “Simply because of the crowd, my convoy was not able to move.” But what most excited Sahrawis is that Moon also traveled to the part of Western Sahara that is governed by POLISARIO—the first time a UN secretary-general has done so.

While Morocco and POLISARIO were at war, from 1976 to 1991, Morocco built a defensive wall—a winding sand berm punctuated by forts—that divides Western Sahara between a larger, westerly portion, ruled by Morocco, and an easterly portion administered by the liberation front. The latter has long stationed its army in these parts of Western Sahara. Since the 1991 ceasefire, POLISARIO has hosted demining programs to make the territory safer for civilian Sahrawis to raise herds there. In response to Moroccan insistence that these areas were an uninhabited “no man’s land,” from 2007 the independence movement also pursued new urban development. NGOs have funded the digging of wells, and schools and health care facilities have expanded in several towns.

According to the vicissitudes of resources, rains and grasses, some refugee families tack back and forth between the camps in Algeria and POLISARIO-controlled Western Sahara. In other cases, families have moved to become residents of the new towns. While this move suits some families’ preference for raising animals as a livelihood, households that officially relocate can no longer register to receive rations in the refugee camps (since they would no longer be living across an international border, and therefore would no longer conform to current definitions of refugeehood). The absence of rations for those resident in POLISARIO-controlled Western Sahara has kept the numbers of families willing to relocate there relatively low. Notoriously, there is no public access to accurate counts (if such figures exist) of the Sahrawis living in the refugee camps or the portions of Western Sahara on either side of the berm (or indeed of the Moroccan population that has moved into the Moroccan-controlled area). In the early 2000s, the World Food Program and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated the refugee population at 100,000 and 165,000, respectively; POLISARIO sources mention a few hundred families relocating to the new towns late in the decade.

Moon visited Bir Lehlou, one of the centers for the peacekeeping troops of the UN’s Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara, and also one of the newly expanding towns of POLISARIO-controlled Western Sahara. The liberation front made the most of the opportunity, inviting Moon into a traditional-style tent made of black goat hair. Such a shelter contrasts with the cloth tents supplied by relief organizations, such as that belonging to Almuadala. Sahrawi television cameras captured the moment when, “just like any other guest,” Moon was welcomed with a cup of the sweet green tea that marks hospitality, sociability and esteem.

A Diplomatic Chessboard

Moon’s unprecedented visit to the POLISARIO-controlled zone did not please officials in Rabat. Moroccan authorities quickly criticized what they interpreted as Moon’s deviation from neutrality in having referred to the “occupation” of Western Sahara. Following demonstrations in Morocco against Moon’s choice of words, the Moroccan government asked the UN to withdraw civilian staffers and to close a military liaison office for the UN mission in Western Sahara. Since the end of wartime hostilities in 1991, Morocco and POLISARIO have taken up positions on a virtual battlefield of international diplomacy. The rivals vie over the legality of the exploitation of natural resources in
Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and the introduction of UN human rights monitoring in the territory (Morocco is opposed). In a recent episode, Sweden undertook to review whether to recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the state authority that the liberation front founded in 1976. POLISARIO seemed a step closer to adding a Western European nation to the fluctuating number of mostly post-colonial states that, alongside the African Union, acknowledge SADR as legitimate. Sweden’s review is widely perceived to have been a factor in Morocco withholding a permit in September 2015 for the opening of Morocco’s first Ikea store. After Sweden announced in January 2016 that it would not recognize SADR, the permit was granted.

Moon’s visit may have raised Sahrawis’ hopes of renewed interest in resolving the conflict. But with little indication of effective international pressure on either party to modify its position—Morocco is staunchly against the inclusion of independence as an option in a referendum on self-determination, and POLISARIO insists it be included—Sahrawi refugees, and their counterparts in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, can expect more of the status quo.

**Life in Exile**

In the refugee camps, built in a part of the desert infamous among Sahrawis for burning summers and harsh winters, life goes on. Almuadala and Mohamad Fadel arrived as teenagers, grew to adulthood, married and brought up their children. Now their grandchildren have become the third generation in the camps that, despite hosting tens of thousands of people in a scarcely populated region, are ordinarily invisible on maps of Algeria (unless the map purports to represent the Western Sahara conflict). Algeria has delegated authority over the camps to POLISARIO, which acts in administrative fusion with SADR. Over time the governing authorities have faced the urgent questions of how to keep the refugees alive and
safe, and how to give them access to education and health services. They have also addressed issues that arise when refugee camps become long-term homes.

Refugees and their leadership need to agree on a form of governing authority, and make decisions about how scarce resources—food rations, replacement tents, opportunities for training and education abroad, jobs with international and national NGOs—are to be distributed. For Sahrawi refugees, there is a cycle of local elections and participatory meetings, SADR parliamentary elections and the POLISARIO General Congress for discussing and deciding on policy. These events can also be made into strategies of international visibility, as legislators from countries that recognize SADR are invited to sessions of the SADR parliament or the opening of a General Congress.

Longevity might seem to strengthen such institutions: Elections have been running in exile for some 40 years. In practice, the longer displacement continues, along with the paucity of resources, the harder it may be for people to dedicate time and energy to posts. In 2014, SADR MPs were paid 4,000 Algerian dinars (a little short of $40) every three months. As one female MP explained, “I do this from conviction, not for the money.” She then burst into laughter, as if the idea of representing the refugee camps for material gain was absurd.

Some aspects of the nuts and bolts of running the camps are shielded from the view of external audiences. The refugees need to deal with marital disputes, divorce settlements and compensation claims for the car accidents that have proliferated in exile (many of the old jeeps in circulation are well past their prime). If such cases cannot be settled between families directly, they may end up at a local (SADR) court. Refugees convicted of crimes may be sentenced to serve time in SADR prisons.

As the population ages, refugees find themselves involved in increasingly complex inheritance cases. Siblings dispersed geographically among the refugee camps and annexed areas, and possibly other places, need to coordinate among themselves to apportion what they have been left. In the case of houses in the Moroccan-controlled areas, refugees with rights to a share of the property may be unable to appear physically in a Moroccan-run court to stake their claim. They may have to rely on family cooperation and subterfuge to receive an inheritance, which can be crucial for survival in exile.

A Move Toward Visibility

Survival in the Sahrawi refugee camps is exhausting. Forty years on from their formation, most of the camps still lack access to an electrical grid, and the recently installed communal water taps do not run every day. Secure livelihoods are rare. Rations baskets have shrunk as donor fatigue has risen. Wages for employment in SADR ministries (introduced in the early 2000s) are meager, and sometimes delayed for months. Opportunities in informal markets are greater or lesser depending on the availability of hard currency—sent to refugee families by relatives working abroad. For the past decade, and especially after the collapse of the last round of UN plans for a referendum, many refugees have sought to migrate to Europe—in particular, Spain. The route is difficult. Since no European country recognizes SADR passports, refugees must obtain other travel documents, either an Algerian passport through an opaque arrangement between Algeria and SADR, which keeps some waiting months or years, or an Algerian or Mauritanian passport through ancestral or current kinship ties. Then refugees must get a suitable letter of invitation for a visa. Once in Europe, refugees must apply for a status that would allow them, eventually, to work—and then must find a job. And, of course, a would-be migrant must find the money to fund all of these steps along the way.

While the chances of finding a job have diminished greatly since the financial crisis of 2008, Sahrawi refugees still look to Europe as a space from which to generate remittances for relatives who have remained in the camps. Yet, increasingly, they marry these aspirations for greater material security with an ethic of visibility for their activism to support self-determination for Western Sahara. Wary of accusations of straying from the cause, Sahrawi refugees in Spain have organized local activist groups. One young broadcaster for SADR radio opined: “I’d like to go to Spain. That’s where the most activism is happening now.”

Refugees who move away from the camps may still keep them in sight. Refugee homes constantly buzz with talk of, telephone calls from and visits from migrants who “have to go back [to the camps] to recharge their batteries,” as one man said. For the generation of migrants who lived much of their adult life in exile, the camps, rather than Spain, are a spiritual home in which—in the absence of a post-conflict Western Sahara—they imagine their final resting place. Migrants’ associations collect funds to repatriate the bodies of refugees who die in Spain to the camps. The graveyards, like the camps themselves, have expanded over the years. A crucial question for the younger generations of refugees—the peers of the children and grandchildren of Mohamad Fadel and Almuadala born in exile or, like their youngest grandchild, in Spain—is how they can achieve visibility in their fifth decade as refugees, and indeed beyond.

Endnotes

1 Jacob Mundy, “Western Sahara’s 48 Hours of Rage,” Middle East Report 257 (Winter 2010).
2 Footage of the visit is accessible at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhFNgFrOuAQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhFNgFrOuAQ).
3 Reuters, March 10, 2016.
6 USA Today, April 16, 2013.
7 BBC, January 19, 2016.
Financial Citizenship and the Hidden Crisis of the Working Class in the “New Turkey”

Basak Kus

Substantial political, economic and social changes have taken place in Turkey since the early 2000s. Much of this transformation has happened on the watch of the Justice and Development Party (best known by its Turkish acronym, AKP), which has been in power since 2002. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, founder of the party and president of the country since 2014, has proclaimed several times that the old Turkey is no more and a new Turkey has taken its place.

An important but understudied aspect of this new Turkey is the rise of finance and credit markets, and Turkish households’ increasing embeddedness in them. This phenomenon is not simply economic, though it may seem so at first. It has important implications for the politics of class and inequality, and therefore, for electoral politics.

The rise of finance and credit markets is a global trend. Many scholars see this development as part of a larger political-economic reconfiguration whereby “the basis of prosperity shifted from the social democratic formula of working classes supported by government intervention to the neoliberal conservative one of banks, stock exchanges and financial markets.”

During the post-war era of “embedded liberalism,” governments intervened to provide citizens with economic security and even prosperity, but now in the era of neoliberalism, citizens turn to banks and other financial institutions to make ends meet or to enhance their lifestyles. In other words, financial citizenship has taken hold where social citizenship has been undermined.

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Financialization and credit market expansion in Turkey must also be seen as part of the country’s neoliberal transformation. The past few decades have witnessed a reformulation of the relationship between the state, banks and citizens. Access to credit made it possible for Turkish citizens to enjoy a wide variety of products and services that they could not otherwise afford. It compensated for stagnant wages, and blurred once sharp class boundaries. This pattern of credit-reliant consumption is hardly sustainable, however. Middle- and lower-income Turkish households have become highly vulnerable to macroeconomic risks and shocks due to their burgeoning levels of indebtedness.

The AKP government has been applauded, and rewarded at the ballot box, for its management of the economy and for improving the quality of life of the average Turk. Yet, upon closer inspection, it seems that the economic wellbeing for which the AKP has taken so much credit is not totally due to higher productivity and wages, but instead to expanding consumption and credit use. Underneath the surface may be a hidden crisis, the biggest casualty of which would be Turkey’s working population.

Financialization in Turkey

Broadly speaking, financialization is the heavier presence of financial institutions and transactions in the overall economy and the everyday life of citizens. In Turkey, financialization of the economy started in the early 1980s with a set of deregulatory policies. Until that time Turkey had an inward-oriented economy, a large public sector and an interventionist state. It aimed at generating rapid industrialization through five-year development plans. State-owned enterprises accounted for about half of total investment in the economy at the end of the 1970s. Some of these enterprises were overstaffed and inefficient, posting sizable losses that put a strain on the government budget. The trade policy focused on import-substitution and lacked mechanisms to boost exports. Trade deficits were chronic and balance of payments crises were a regular occurrence. The financial system remained highly regulated in this period. The government fixed interest rates for both deposits and credits, subjected financial earnings to heavy taxation and maintained a fixed exchange rate policy. In short, the combination of three major institutional instruments—public enterprises, a restrictive trade regime and financial repression—produced a not-so-efficient mixed economy.

Starting in the early 1980s, successive governments undertook a set of reforms including privatization, trade opening, and deregulation of labor and financial markets in order to transform Turkey into a liberal market economy. By the end of the 1990s, about 90 percent of the employment and 80 percent of the value-added was already taking place in the private sector, foreign trade volume had more than doubled, and the financial sector had greatly expanded. The results of financial liberalization were particularly visible in the banking sector. In only two decades, from 1980 to 2000, the number of banks nearly doubled, according to the Bank Association of Turkey, and the total banking assets increased more than sevenfold. As in most developing countries, however, economic liberalization reforms in Turkey were carried out swiftly and unsupported by robust regulatory and macro-economic policies. Problems began to appear, particularly in the financial sector. Having been deregulated without effective supervision, the banking system became very fragile, very quickly.

During the 1990s, banks heavily invested in high-yield government securities. The annual real interest rate for government securities averaged over 30 percent in this period. It is important to note that public-sector borrowing from domestic banks was not itself a new practice. But with a liberalized financial system, it reached new heights. Turkish banks, public and private, borrowed from international markets to buy the government paper and pull in high profits. But the large foreign loans left the banks exposed to currency fluctuations and liquidity risks.6 These vulnerabilities came ashore with the 2001 financial crisis. The Turkish banking sector lost large amounts of money following the devaluation of the Turkish lira, due to their unfavorable foreign currency position.6 During the years 1999–2001, the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey had to rescue 18 banks. The cost of the banking crisis to the Turkish economy was steep—public debt rose to over 70 percent of gross domestic product in 2001.

The AKP, led by Erdoğan, won the November 2002 elections against this gloomy economic backdrop. Despite its Islamist roots, the AKP embraced globalization and the project of accession to the European Union, and continued to advance the neoliberal agenda. During the AKP’s first term (2002–2007), real GDP rose by 7 percent annually, which many national and international observers hailed as a swift recovery from the crisis. In this period of high growth and rising consumption, the financial sector began to expand and Turkish banks, in particular, began to play a bigger role in the lives of citizens.

Credit, Inequality and Class

Using credit for consumption is a relatively recent phenomenon in Turkey. Until the 1980s, the act of getting a loan carried a cultural stigma—it was something one would do only in times of financial hardship. Stores offered installment plans to consumers for certain products, but that was the extent of Turkish households’ engagement with the credit system. In the 1990s, faced with stiffer competition in a deregulated environment, major Turkish banks began to develop their retail banking units and offer consumer credit, but both supply and demand remained modest. For banks, investing in government securities was a far more lucrative business.

The 2001 financial crisis and the subsequent policy changes decreased banks’ opportunities to make profits from financing the public deficit, and banks were compelled to explore other venues. Soon the banks made a decisive turn from financing
government consumption to financing household consumption. They launched aggressive advertising campaigns so as to change the prevailing norms around credit and debt, and to gin up consumer demand for their expanding lines of credit products. In the 2000s, credit use became a fully legitimate aspect of middle-class existence. Total consumer credit as a percentage of GDP increased more than tenfold—from 1.8 percent to 18.7 percent—and the number of credit card users reached more than 50 million, all in a decade’s time, between 2002 and 2012.

Credit is a powerful political tool. It affects the dynamics of class and inequality in at least two major ways. First, having access to credit boosts households’ consumption capacity. It allows for the purchase of houses, cars, and a variety of products and services, and helps decrease the discontent that the lower and middle classes might have with their actual level of income and purchasing power. An important consequence is that credit alters people’s perceptions of the class structure and their place in it. In a world without credit, people’s class positions can be inferred from their consumption, and their consumption from income. Credit decouples these linkages. It permits people to consume beyond their means, and makes it harder to distinguish the haves from the have-nots. All in all, it mitigates class and status differences, and casts the existing level of social welfare in a positive light. It is no surprise that, in advanced nations like the United States, expanding access to credit was part of the progressive political agenda in the post-war era.

Second, credit changes the way governments deal with inequality. During the past two decades, the rise of credit-based welfare enabled governments across the world to push forward a neoliberal agenda without much resistance from citizens who become subject to more risk and insecurity in the process. Throughout the post-war era, governments had used tools of social policy to manage the tension between the vagaries of markets and citizens’ demands for security and predictability in their lives. States took on debt to create jobs, to redistribute wealth and income, and to provide social security. The era of neoliberalism has seen a retrenchment of government intervention in these areas. There has been a shift from socialization of risk to privatization of it—individuals and households themselves began to incur debt to pay the bills or upgrade their standard of living.

The AKP era in Turkey must be reconsidered from this angle as well. The expansion of credit boosted citizens’ purchasing capacity and material welfare. And it partly explains why the AKP government remained able to push forward a neoliberal agenda without creating much discontent among the larger part of the citizenry. At the same time, credit-reliant consumption and welfare exposed Turkish
citizens to new forms of socio-economic vulnerability associated with increasing indebtedness.

Credit-Based Welfare

Since the advent of Turkey’s multi-party system in 1946, the AKP is the only party that has been able to keep effective majority status for more than a decade. In the 2002 elections, shortly after it was founded, the AKP secured 34.3 percent of the popular vote, a large plurality that gave it control of Parliament, due to the Turkish electoral system whereby a party must capture 10 percent of the nationwide vote to get a seat. In the 2007 parliamentary elections, it increased its share of the vote to 46.6 percent. In the 2011 parliamentary contests, it got 49.8 percent of the popular vote, and in the 2014 mayoral elections, 60.7 percent. In August 2014, in the first direct election of a Turkish president, Erdoğan won 51.8 percent of the popular vote. The June 2015 general elections were a setback, but even then the party managed to get 41 percent of the tally, and in any case it recovered its parliamentary majority in the snap elections Erdoğan called in November. Much has been written about why the party consistently does so well at the ballot box. It is generally agreed that economic trends are the main reason. There are several components to this “It’s the economy!” thesis.

The first one has to do with the trickling down of economic growth. After the 1990s, also known as the “lost decade,” characterized by severe macroeconomic instability and negative growth rates, Turkey experienced its longest period of uninterrupted economic growth in the 2000s, which averaged 6–7 percent per year, while annual inflation plummeted. The high growth-low inflation environment helped the AKP to broaden its electoral appeal. As Ziya Öniş argues, the fact that inflation was reduced to single digits is itself a significant development, since the hyperinflation that Turkey experienced during the 1980s and 1990s tends to penalize the poor. But more importantly, the benefits of economic growth also seem to have been widely shared. During the 2000s poverty rates declined and income inequality contracted. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, the proportion of citizens living on less than $4.30 a day fell from 30.3 percent in 2002 to 2.06 percent in 2013.

A second set of arguments focuses on how social benefit provision has operated in the period of AKP-managed neoliberal economic growth. There have been increases in government expenditures in certain areas, particularly health, which have been supported enthusiastically by the electorate. But informal channels of social welfare provision have widened as well. The AKP managed to bolster its political support among the needy in cities by building neighborhood networks, through face-to-face interaction, and distributing basic goods and services. The marriage of neoliberal economic policies with a “communitarian” social policy outlook contributed to the AKP’s electoral strength among the urban poor.

Financialization and expansion of credit markets must also be added to the list of economic factors that inclined Turkish voters toward Erdoğan’s party. The expansion of credit markets has encouraged bigger-spending lifestyles and ameliorated inequality, while making the remaining disparities seem innocuous. As a Turkish banker put it: “The middle-class ‘feel’ in Turkey has been engineered through debt…. Despite earning the minimum wage, tens of thousands of households were able to acquire nicer phones, better furniture, electronics…all thanks to bank loans and maxed-out credit cards.”

The Dark Side of Credit

There are limits to this credit-reliant, consumption-driven growth. On the one hand, credit fills the gap between households’ consumption aspirations and their stagnant incomes. On the other hand, for many middle- and lower-income families credit reliance leads to heightened socio-economic vulnerability from higher debt. In the US, this indebtedness has been called “the hidden crisis of the American middle class.” Turkey is likewise witnessing the emergence of a “debtfare system” — a set of institutional and ideological practices aimed at regulating and normalizing the growing dependence on consumer credit to meet basic needs.

Income inequality and poverty in Turkey are relatively high. To quote a 2014 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report:

• Disposable household income in Turkey is about 45 percent of the OECD average. Turkey also has the third highest level of income inequality and the third highest level of relative poverty in the OECD area. One in every five Turks is poor, compared with just above one in ten on average across the OECD.

• One out of three Turks report that they cannot afford to buy sufficient food, compared with an OECD average of less than one out of seven.

• Public social spending in Turkey at 12.8 percent of GDP is substantially lower than the OECD average of 21.8 percent. Most of the social spending is related to health, old age and survivors benefits, while support for the working-age population is very low.

The rise in household expenditures during the 2000s has been higher than the rise in incomes, thereby decreasing savings and fueling credit reliance. Particularly among low-income households, the ratio of household debt to disposable income has increased a great deal.

As of 2010, based on Bank Association of Turkey data reviewed by Turkish economist Elif Karaçimen, more than 40 percent of borrowers of consumer loans were people making less than 1,000 lira (roughly $600) per month. A survey Karaçimen carried out

Continued on page 48.
Becoming Arab American

Louise Cainkar

Scholars have long found that while pan-Arab organizations in the United States called themselves Arab American, few individuals adopted that appellation as a personal identity, preferring Iraqi, for instance, or Syrian. So I was struck, while interviewing 45 Palestinian Americans attending high school in Palestine, that so many of them referred to themselves and others as Arab American, in addition to Palestinian. Why does Arab American make sense as an identity now, when it has not in the past? The experiences of these transnational youth—17- and 18-year-olds most of whom were born and raised in the US and who moved to Palestine as pre-teens—suggest that the answer lies in notions of belonging and exclusion in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Childhood in the US

The overwhelming majority of the youth described their American childhood as a positive yet “othered” experience: They wanted to see themselves as fully American but they could not. Family and community contributed to the kids’ notion that they were different. Their parents told them variably that they were Palestinian, Arab or Muslim; they made their children speak Arabic at home and held them to distinct rules of decorum. They taught their children that they were special, to be proud of who they were, and to claim their rights as Americans. But outsiders, mostly other children, communicated to these Palestinians that their differences from others were bad. All of the teens’ names have been changed in what follows.

Aymen, from a majority-white Chicago suburb, said his sense of identity in the US was tied to “certain conditions. Like, when I was at my house, no, I didn’t feel American” because his parents would get angry with him when he spoke English. When at his private Islamic school, “I felt like half-half—half-American and half-Arab or Muslim.” “But on the streets I felt American, basically.” There were notable exceptions, however:

My aunt and my sister were picking up the garbage in front of the house and there was a lady…. She shouted at my sister, because my sister was coming from school wearing a jilbab (long gown) and mandil (headscarf), and she said, “Go back to your country, Arab. I’m gonna blow up your building just like you blew up the towers.” We called the police because I was young and scared. The police parked far away from our house and we had to go them. They didn’t come to us because they’re racists. [And how did you feel?] I didn’t feel anything. I felt mad because they did that to my sister. [Well, why do you think they did that?] Because of after September 11.

The youth I spoke with were 7 and 8 years old in 2001. Nearly every one of them could recall racially charged actions or micro-aggressions on the part of classmates around that time. Boys mainly experienced them at school. Ali, from Tampa, Florida, said there were always “fights and trouble”—“we did not blend in because of our race.” Describing his neighborhood as “ghetto,” white and black, he said, “straight up they did not like us. After 9/11 they kept calling us terrorists and then, like, other names.” Linda likewise reported that her brother scuffled with another boy who called him a sand nigger. Husni, from Alabama, said it was schoolmates who helped him realize that he was an Arab. “When you’re younger, you don’t really see it. But then when you grow up you start getting like, like I said, you’re classified into groups. Like, at school, you start realizing you’re Arab, you know. Because everybody else is saying, ‘I’m this, I’m that.’” I’m what? A terrorist. “During like September 11…they’d call me Husama bin Laden.”

Girls described racialized encounters not only at school, but also in their neighborhoods and at shopping malls when accompanied by mothers in hijab. Lubna, from Detroit,
said that one of her friends would tell her, “You guys are Arabs; you are terrorists.” Fatin, who briefly moved back to Chicago from Palestine in 2008, recounted a “bad experience” at school: “Some kid called me bin Laden.” Homma, from Philadelphia, said she was likewise asked “if she was related to Osama bin Laden,” a question she found “kind of offensive.” Muna, from Atlanta, said, “I always knew that no one’s gonna fully accept you no matter what you are. Because you’re always gonna be somewhat different. But, it was also uncomfortable…because I’m Arab, and I wasn’t always, like, the whitest or the blondest.” She recalled an incident from her childhood:

This one time we were at the mall and there was, um, a woman with her little toddler…. I was with my mom and sister…. My sister used to wear the hijab but she took it off. But back then she was wearing it. So, me and her and my mom were walking and she was coming toward us, and she literally went to the other side and then went back after she passed us. You know, I’m not a terrorist.

Saif, from the Boston area, articulates how the prejudices of others rendered his Arab identity subjectively salient:

Before 9/11 I was, you know, a young child. I didn’t really understand that much. After that I started seeing the way, you know, the whole September 11 events and all, the Iraq war. I thought, you know, how people were less warm to us, they were unwelcoming…. So I guess in America there were times when I felt American, but it was a small feeling. It was really, I mean, you always have more Arab than American, like 90 percent of the time.

He related wakeup calls at school:

On 9/11, I was in a public school. And what happened was they sat us down and they were like, “There was an attack by a terrorist, blah blah blah,” and I was like, “Well, I think I’m Muslim.” So everyone looked at me, like, are you serious? ‘Cause they all thought I was Christian and whatnot. And at that moment it hit me that you’re not, like this is different. This is the real world. And you need to adjust. Because you’re not gonna fit in if you keep this up. So that had a huge impact on who I was…. So they all looked at me, like, shocked, I guess. Like, “Are you serious? Like you’re a Muslim? Well, where were you?” Or whatever. “How come no one knew?”

Saif was not alone in reporting that he lost friends after the September 11 attacks. Many girls and boys told stories of suddenly being shunned, sometimes by their best friends. While plenty of slurs were directed at Arab and Muslim Americans before 2001, these teens clearly see themselves as the post-September 11 generation.

It was thus outside the home that these Palestinian American youth learned that they were not just special or different, as their parents had told them, but that the differences were associated with being Arab (and sometimes Muslim), something that was “other than American” and no mere violation of monocultural conformity. The message is clear: Palestinian is Arab and Arab is terrorist. One cannot be American and a threat to America at the same time.

Moving to Palestine

The intersecting identities of these kids as Palestinians and Americans underwent another set of changes in meaning and salience when they moved to Palestine, mainly with their mothers and siblings. Now, in the eyes of Palestinians, especially other teens, the fact that they were American moved to the forefront: They were othered once again. Aymen lamented, “I remember when I was in America they called me, they’d say I’m Arab, I’m Palestinian. And when I am over here they call me an American.” Similarly, Yasmine said, “They just say I’m American, and that, like, I wasn’t raised here, like, all my life like them, so that I can’t really be Palestinian. But I am, 100 percent. I was born here. This is the place I want to live, hopefully, in the future.”

The youth described being made fun of and followed, their English imitated; boys spoke about being challenged to fights. The way they dressed, walked and spoke gave them away. While these intimidating encounters were upsetting, over time they ceased. Most of the teens adapted their dress and behavior to fit in, their Arabic language skills improved, and they experienced what it meant to be Palestinian, integral to which was the shared suffering of daily life under Israeli occupation. The Palestinian Americans were prohibited, just like their locally raised peers, from crossing Israeli military barriers into Jerusalem. As Nina put it:

If my parents didn’t bring me and my sisters and my brothers here, I think I wouldn’t be, like, the person I am right now…. I understand more, like, because we see stuff, we face more stuff, you know, the occupation…. Every single day here in Filastin, you learn something.

Over time, Palestinian Americans earned their Palestinian identity in the eyes of local Palestinians. It became possible to be both Palestinian and American without sacrificing their dignity or denying or losing part of who they were. This possibility had been denied them in the US, where a complete sense of belonging required them to be white.

When I asked the youth what it meant to be American and to be Palestinian, their responses featured the same stark contrast. Being Palestinian had powerful emotive content. It was associated with being proud and resilient. On the other hand, many kids had a difficult time describing what an American was or what being American meant. Many associated being American with being white; some said an American was simply a person born in the US; and some
Thinking About Return

Nonetheless, America was the place to be if you wanted to get an education, earn money and give your children a better life. The overwhelming majority of these youth were excited to return to the US after high school. College in Palestine was largely inaccessible for a number of reasons, language being primary, and job opportunities were limited. The teens were familiar with the much wider array of employment and post-secondary education options in the US. While boys spoke about imminent return, many girls would have to wait for siblings to complete high school or until after marriage.

Just when they had figured out how to be Palestinian and American in Palestine, and were able to claim their status as Palestinians, the youth were preoccupied with thoughts of going back that filled them with hopes, but also worries. Nina feared that once again she would be viewed as a racial category.

You know, right now I’m going off to college. Sometimes, you know, I have those thoughts where, like, people won’t accept me, you know, like for who I am. Like, oh I’m from Filastin, I’m from Palestine. I’m afraid, like, I won’t feel like I belong there. Even though I was born in America, but sometimes I don’t know. You get those thoughts, that you won’t be accepted or you won’t be seen or looked at as a person, like you are looked at in Palestine.

Arab American

Spending their high school years in Palestine had accomplished for these youth what their parents had intended: It had strengthened their identification with and emotional attachment to Palestine. Huda said, “Like, all these families come here basically to teach their kids who they are. Like, because of how, like, in America, I didn’t know what it was to be a Palestinian.” At the same time, identification as an Arab American was frequently mentioned when speaking about the US. For example, Rima had difficulty reconciling being Palestinian and American, reaching the conclusion that she was Arab American:

Um, I would say I’m Palestinian, but I was raised mostly in America. [So you are a Palestinian who lived in America?] No. Well, I was born in America, so I guess I’m [pause] American, but I don’t know. Um, that’s a good question. I’m an Arab American because my parents are from here, but I was born in America.

Experiences at school had established or deepened their subjective sense of being Arab American. Arab American was a racialized category invoked by those around them; it brought on the taunts and the fights. As Kamilla noted, “To tell you the truth, me as an Arab American, you see a lot of the propaganda, hatred, wrong…false ideas that people get about us Arabs and Muslim in general. Nonetheless, though, to tell you the truth, I couldn’t be prouder to be anything else.” Their experiences in Palestine filled the teens with a pride they were denied in the US and provided them with resources for resistance when they got back. As Hasheema said, “I am very proud now, and I wish I could take this back to America and, like, tell everyone how, like, what it is like to know who you are.” There were authentic reasons to adopt an Arab American identity. Youth pointed out that Arab Americans share language, culture and a specific American experience. As Samira noted, “Arab Americans, you know, all have the same background. Your parents decided to move here [back to Palestine]. Why? The same issues with the violent environment [in the US], you know.” Arab American was also a term used by youth when speaking about the type of person they would prefer to marry. Through their own struggles in Palestine, these teens learned that they had to come to terms with being American.

Palestinian is who you are, but Arab American is what you are. It is an identity that provides an anchor to a place in American society where one can find belonging. Arab American is a pan-ethnic, racialized identity that embraces non-whiteness while conferring a coherent position in a racially organized society. Being Arab American reconciles all sorts of contradictions that being Palestinian American cannot in the US. This identity explains how Aymen could feel “American on the streets” even as he and his family were racially victimized. As Kimberlé Crenshaw has noted, when negatively racialized identities become anchors of subjectivity they can be used to empower their holders. “A strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a social position rather than to vacate and destroy it.”1 As a racialized identity, being Arab American holds the potential for resources and solidarity to mobilize with others who share a similar positionality, as well as the capacity to be who one is on one’s own terms. It is an identity that allows each person to assert his or her Americanness and Arabness with pride. Why now? For some time Arabs have been cast by others as the antipode to whiteness, but never as vehemently as in the era of the post-September 11 war on terror. These post-September 11 generation youth experienced that social position intensely, and have decided to occupy and defend it.2

Endnotes

2 A similar argument can be made for Muslim identity.

Jack Shenker’s book is the definitive account of the 2011 Egyptian uprising to date. Many scholars and journalists have taken as their point of departure the notion that the uprising was a one-off democratizing experiment that failed. With his on-the-ground reporting, Shenker offers a compelling alternative view of a historical process—a revolution—that is still unfolding. *The Egyptians* weaves the voices of ordinary people into an analysis of social movements and crumbling governance as vampire-like capitalism sinks its fangs into the largest Arab society.

Shenker, the former *Guardian* correspondent in Cairo, was a resident of the city from 2008–2012 and has been a regular visitor since. He has traveled across the country, listening to people discuss their daily problems and watching them resist “a life of repression” in the state’s iron grip.

It seems absurd that Shenker’s book should stand out for taking ordinary Egyptians seriously, given the shelves of volumes on the uprising, but it does. There is nothing here about donkeys or camels or pyramids or bad traffic. Instead, the reader is taken into the neighborhoods and lives of the omnipresent but politically invisible majority living in the ‘ashwa’iyyat (informal settlements) sandwiched between central Cairo and the upper-class enclaves that divert water into the desert for the playgrounds of Egypt’s 1 percent. That elite acts as if ordinary citizens are pawns to be ignored, but Shenker shows the power people have to coopt and deflect the dictates from on high (or from outside during colonial times).

Academic researchers have produced solid work on Egyptian elections, labor mobilization, the Kifaya movement, Muslim-Coptic relations, women’s rights, neoliberal economic reforms and elite political machinations, among other topics. All tell important parts of the story. The brilliance of Shenker’s book, however, is to blend all these parts into one.

Shenker’s narrative moves seamlessly from disputes over working conditions in a ceramic factory near Suez to struggles over farmland in Burg al-Burullus. It traces the lineages of political change before 2011, the gains made after the initial 18 days when the state found itself on the ropes, and the counter-revolution led by the military. Along the way readers are treated to histories that have been suppressed or not fully explored—the thread tying the ‘Urabi revolt of 1882 to the revolutionary tradition of Qamshish and land confiscations in Sarandu. Time and again, Shenker shows, there is strength in numbers.

There is no more illustrative anecdote in the book than the tale of the army assault on Qursaya island in the Nile just north of Cairo in 2007. The military sought to clear the island for development but the inhabitants fended off eviction. Before the soldiers arrive, the head of the local council, former ruling-party parliamentarian and ceramic tile magnate Muhammad Abu al-Aynayn, tells the residents that they should do as they are told because they are weak. Resident Muhammad Abla retorts, “Who told you we are weak? We are strong. We are going to win and you are going to lose…. You should take heed.”

Although Egypt’s prospects look dim at present, Shenker is right that the process of which 2011 was a part is not over. The populace continues to resist and sabotage a state apparatus bent on achieving submission.

A final strength of the book is to situate Egyptian events in the transnational neoliberal moment. Egypt is not a backwater or exceptional but exemplary and even a bellwether. As Shenker argues, “Outside of Egypt, too, including in many august procedural democracies, citizens living in states structured by neoliberal doctrine are wondering how strong the connection is between regular elections and real popular political agency; the Egyptian revolution has helped to force this vital question open.” The world over, the depreciating purchasing power of the middle class, police brutality and state surveillance are additional realities that leave many wondering if “stability” is just a code word for repression. As Egypt goes, so might the world. Stay tuned.

—Joshua Stacher
Among metal workers in Istanbul showed that nearly half of her respondents regularly took out bank loans so as to be able to make payments on other debts, mostly rent and loans from other banks. Her research also found that the most frequently mentioned reason for using credit cards was to buy food or other necessities. For many working-class citizens in Turkey, becoming a part of the debtfare system is not a choice but a structural imperative.

There is also a political side to high levels of indebtedness. Debt is a disciplining tool that induces conformity with the logic of the economic and political system in place. In the aftermath of the November elections, a worker who resides in the Gebze industrial area wrote an illustrative letter to a left-wing newspaper. The worker explained that although he was not sympathetic to the AKP’s politics, he nonetheless had voted for the party. As someone who had bought a house on a 15-year loan, he went on, he was concerned that if the AKP’s majority government were voted out of office, the ensuing political instability would quickly turn into economic turmoil, buffeting working folks like him who are hanging by a socio-economic thread.

Looking at the rise of credit markets not only helps to draw a more complete picture of the neoliberal economic transformation in contemporary Turkey, but also helps to explain the AKP’s political success—and to reveal its shaky economic foundations.

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</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Iran’s Many Deals</td>
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<tr>
<td>MER 276</td>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>ISIS</td>
</tr>
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<td>Summer 2015</td>
<td>Inside the Inside: Life in Prison</td>
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<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>Visions: Egypt, Palestine, Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 273</td>
<td>Winter 2014</td>
<td>Yemen’s Times of Turmoil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 272</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>Views from the Provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 271</td>
<td>Summer 2014</td>
<td>Fuel and Water: The Coming Crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 270</td>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>China in the Middle East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 269</td>
<td>Winter 2013</td>
<td>Struggling for Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 268</td>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>Gender Front Lines: Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 267</td>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>Christians: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 266</td>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>Iraq: Ten Years Later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MER 265</td>
<td>Winter 2012</td>
<td>Egypt: The Uprising Two Years On</td>
</tr>
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<th>Canada 1 year</th>
<th>Canada 2 years</th>
<th>Rest of world 1 year</th>
<th>Rest of world 2 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>$42</td>
<td>$77</td>
<td>$42</td>
<td>$77</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>$180</td>
<td>$345</td>
<td>$180</td>
<td>$345</td>
<td>$210</td>
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