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# REFUGEE LONG TERM PLANNING PERSPECTIVE: A COMPARISON STUDY BETWEEN THE LARGEST CAMPS IN JORDAN, BAQA'A AND ZAATARI CAMPS

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## ABSTRACT

Long term displacement has transformed refugee camps from a temporary shelter into a complex urban environments that challenge both humanitarian and urban planners. The long term development of two large refugee camps in Jordan and Baqa'a (Palestinian, 1968) and Zaatari (Syrian, 2012) are studied in the present paper to comprehend the effect of historical, spatial, and policy contexts on the urbanization of camps and the adaptation of refugees. The study is based on a comparative qualitative approach whose foundation relies on a thorough review of UNHCR, UNRWA, and academic materials, whereby five dimensions are examined, including governance, spatial form, housing, infrastructure, and socio-economic structures. The findings show that both camps have evolved beyond their temporary structures through refugee led transformation and informal urban development. Nonetheless, Baqa'a has come to be a part of the wider urban system, whereas Zaatari is a regulated humanitarian ghetto dependent on state control and donor aid. The analysis reveals essential gaps in the emergency planning instructions, like the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies and Sphere Standards, especially their inability to be long term and contextually adaptable. The article advocates a paradigm shift to inclusive, participatory, and sustainable planning systems, which perceive camps as potential extensions of urban systems, and not single relief spaces. These findings are part of the greater discussion of urbanization of displacement and humanitarian urbanism in the world.

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**KEYWORDS:** Humanitarian Urbanism; Displacement Urbanization; Informal Urban Development; Camp Governance; Spatial Transformation; Housing Evolution; Infrastructure Adaptation; Socio Economic Integration; Emergency Response Frameworks; Participatory Urbanis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global refugee crisis has worsened over the last 20 years due to a combination of factors, including political instability, prolonged armed conflicts, disasters caused by natural hazards, and public health emergencies (Aburamadan, 2022; UNHCR, 2023). By the end of 2022, UNHCR reported 108.4 million forcibly displaced people globally, including 35.3 million refugees the highest number in recorded history (UNHCR, 2023). This unprecedented increase in displacement has been spurred by current crises in Syria, Ukraine, Yemen and South Sudan, in combination with old conflicts such as Palestinian displacement since 1948 and Somali displacement since 1991 (UNHCR, 2022). The scale and duration of these crises make sustainable and context sensitive approaches to address refugee settlement and long term planning an imperative.

According to the UNHCR Report (2023), Turkey, Jordan, Uganda and Lebanon are the countries with the highest number of refugees in the world. Refugees in these countries live in urban areas, in collective centers or in designated camps, according to the policies of the host governments and the coordination of international agencies (Shultz et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2023). In Jordan, over three million refugees are currently living in the country, including about 2.4 million Palestinians and over 660,000 Syrians, as well as smaller communities from Iraq, Yemen and Sudan (World Bank Group, 2022). Most of the refugees live outside of camps, but humanitarian organisations, including UNRWA and UNHCR, have set up thirteen Palestinian refugee camps since 1949 and four camps for Syrian refugees between 2012 and 2014 (Dalal et al., 2018).

Refugee camps are usually designed as emergency temporary settlements, meant to offer immediate shelter, protection, and humanitarian assistance for the forcibly displaced (Dantas & Amado, 2023). But much of these camps have developed over the years into semi-permanent urban settlements, and the permanence aspect is seen in the thick patterns of neighbourhoods, the conversion of shanties into solid buildings and the development of commercial and social institutions (Aburamadan et al., 2020). While post World War II resettlement of refugees occurred on average (within seven years), modern displacement has become much more protracted, where the median disjunction for such refugees is now estimated to be between 17 and 26 years (UNHCR, 2022; Kelberer, 2017; Misselwitz, 2009).

The changing urban form of refugee camps has become a growing focus of scholarly interest, with

researchers theorizing the spaces in terms of temporality and permanency as transient cities, city camps or spaces of exception reflecting urbanization, spatial change and refugee agency. (Aburamadan, 2022; Alnsour & Meaton, 2014; Kennedy, 2004). The dynamics of these spaces are based on several factors, such as length of displacement, refugee socio economic backgrounds, and governance frameworks of host countries and humanitarian agencies (Corsellis & Vitale, 2005). Over time, prolonged occupation brings about socio spatial change, in which refugees adapt their shelters, formulate informal economies and build community networks to enhance their living standards (Aburamadan et al., 2020).

Consequently, the long term planning perspective in refugee studies has become an important area of inquiry. Recent international discourses increasingly see camps as potential urban spaces that can develop in a political, social and economic way to the benefit of both the refugee populations and the host population (Herz, 2020; UNHCR, 2023).

As refugee camps continue to exist over time the inhabitants are creative in making use of the scarce resources, making their shelters increasingly permanent, setting up informal markets, creating social networks, turning temporary emergency settlements into semi-permanent city life (Misselwitz, 2009; Aburamadan et al., 2020). This adaptive transformation has been seen in many different places, such as Palestinian camps throughout the Middle East and the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, where refugees have steadily built up from temporary tents to more permanent structures, and informal economies have thrived (UNHCR, 2022; Herz, 2020).

Despite the increasing evidence that refugee camps are becoming urban settlements, humanitarian agencies and host governments still approach these spaces as temporary solutions intended to offer much needed protection and assistance during times of emergency (Kennedy, 2005; Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020). This perception is embedded in major humanitarian frameworks such as the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies and the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response. The "one size fits all" approach to camp planning commonly neglects the differences in the context of geography, cultures, and refugee needs, thereby long term settlements remain physically inadequate and environmentally vulnerable (Dalal et al., 2018; Aburamadan et al., 2020). Consequently, millions of refugees still live in extended temporary ways, in shelters that do not meet basic standards of durability, comfort or safety (Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000; UNHCR, 2023).

Emerging scholarship focuses on the idea that each refugee camp has a unique urban development process that is shaped by the regulations of the host country, humanitarian interventions, and the agency of refugees themselves in seeking change (Aburamadan, 2022; Chatelard, 2020). The identification of these variations is key to the creation of long term and sustainable planning frameworks. Therefore, the present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the two largest refugee camps in the Kingdom of Jordan, which are Baqa'a Camp (established in 1968 for Palestinian refugees) and Zaatari Camp (established in 2012 for Syrian refugees), to examine the role of historical, spatial and policy contexts in the evolution of camps. The research is about calling attention to the importance of having a long term planning perspective incorporating humanitarian principles with urban and architectural strategies to boost resilience, inclusivity and sustainability in protracted refugee settings.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study has been designed as a comparative qualitative research study based on a comprehensive systematic literature review of academic publications, institutional reports, and grey literature. The main body of the review draws on sources published between 2010 and 2023 and includes documents from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as relevant non governmental organizations (NGOs). Several other peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, and policy papers on planning and management of refugee camps in Jordan were also reviewed.

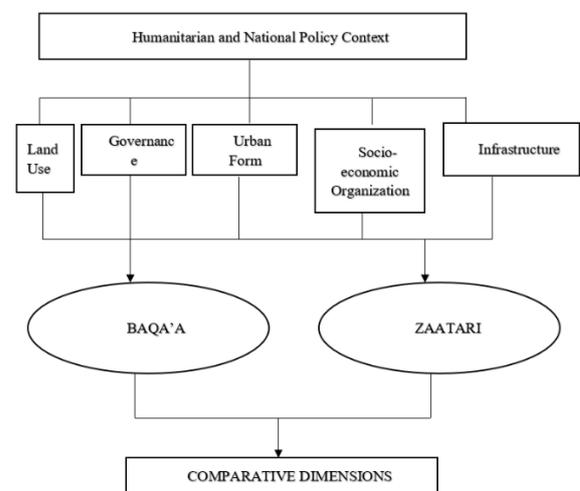
The literature selection followed four main inclusion criteria:

- location: only refugee camps located in Jordan
- establishment period: to contrast older (Baqa'a, 1968) and newer (Zaatari, 2012) camps
- camp scale: both among the largest by population
- relief agency governance: contrasting UNRWA and UNHCR models.

In total, approximately 45 key sources were reviewed, including UNHCR and UNRWA reports, academic journal articles, NGO assessments and government publications. The databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, and UNHCR archives, were used to search the sources by key words, like: refugee camp urbanization, humanitarian planning, the Zaatari Camp, the Baqa'a Camp, and Jordan refugee settlements. The relevance, recency and methodological transparency of each document were considered.

The comparative analysis was based on five thematic dimensions based on the reviewed literature (1) land and spatial organization, (2) governance and institutional management, (3) urban form and housing typologies, (4) socio-economic structures, and (5) infrastructure and service provision.

This thematic framework allowed the systematic comparison, contrast, and planning results of the two camps. The conceptual framework that has been developed for this study, as indicated in Figure 1, incorporates the five dimensions of analysis in a harmonized comparative frame. It illustrates the interaction between land use, governance, urban form, socio-economic organization and infrastructure in humanitarian and national policy contexts that influence the development of refugee camps in Jordan. The framework was used to direct the literature review process as well as the thematic analysis of Baqa and Zaatari Camps.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Comparative Analysis of Baqa'a and Zaatari Refugee Camps.**

Limitations related to methodology are to be mentioned. This research is entirely based on secondary literature that enables a longitudinal and policy oriented comparative analysis but restricts the scope of the study to grasp the lived experiences, informal practices, and recent dynamics on the ground by residents. Consequently, the results are contextual and need to be regarded as analytical understandings of planning and governance processes, not as globally generalizable ones. In the future, this method can be supplemented by primary data, including interviews or field observations, in order to further justify and enrich the results.

Qualitative analysis of the synthesized data revealed recurring patterns, implications of planning and the role that humanitarian policy frameworks play in the long term dynamics of the refugee

settlements (Alnsour and Meaton, 2021; Yiftachel and Segal, 2022; UNHCR, 2023). This framework also enabled a systematic cross case comparison, which showed how spatial organization, governance, and social-economic systems are changing under different humanitarian management structures.

### *Jordan as a Host Country*

Jordan offers a unique comparative context since it is among the largest countries in the world in terms of the number of refugees it hosts. The ensuing regional tensions of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Iraq war, and the Syrian civil war have resulted in several large scale inflows of refugees that have significantly influenced the national demographic, economic, and spatial development of the country since the Nakba of 1948. In the modern context, Jordan is home to more than three million refugees, a situation that has solidly placed it on the interface of the humanitarian aid policies and the urban planning policies of a nation (UNHCR, 2022, 2023).

The sustained nature of refugees has led to the development of two opposing forms of governance that render the situation in Jordan a good subject of the study. Palestinian refugees mainly receive services through the UNRWA system, where Baqa'a Camp (created in 1968) is an example of the urbanization of a temporary settlement in the long term. Syrian refugees, on the contrary, are under the jurisdiction of UNHCR,

where Zaatari Camp (opened 2012) is a new, designed emergency camp. A comparative analysis of these two cases in one national context can facilitate a disciplined comparison of time getting effects of historical legacies, institutional demands, and humanitarian planning systems on spatial organization and refugee livelihoods.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### *3.1 Comparative Overview*

The comparative analysis of Baqa'a and Zaatari camps shows how historical, political, and institutional contexts have resulted in two different but parallel refugee urbanization in Jordan. One such example is a Palestinian camp, Baqa'a, which was formed in 1968 and integrates into the very fabric of the nation with the gradual transformation of an emergency camp into an informal city. Instead, Zaatari, established in 2012 to receive Syrians displaced by civil war, is a symbol of the new type of planned humanitarian residence based on the modern principles of coordination, security, and donor oriented government (UNHCR, 2020; Chatelard, 2020). A comparative overview of the key peculiarities of Baqa'a and Zaatari Camps is given in Table 1, which demonstrates several important differences concerning land use, governance, infrastructure, and socio economic organization.

*Table 1: Summary of Key Characteristics of Baqa'a and Zaatari Refugee Camps.*

Field / Camp	Baqa'a Camp (1968)	Zaatari Camp (2012)
Land	Lies beside Amman along the Jerash Highway; area of 1.4 km <sup>2</sup> . No boundary fences or security gates.	Located in remote desert land near Mafraq; expanded to 5.3 km <sup>2</sup> . Surrounded by fences with two main security gates.
Population	Initially 26,000; currently exceeds 128,000 refugees distributed over 28,000 households.	Planned for 20,000; peaked at 150,000 in 2013; currently around 81,000 people.
Organization	Initially managed solely by UNRWA; since 1988 jointly administered with the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA)	Managed by UNHCR and the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) with coordination of over 50 humanitarian agencies.
Urban Pattern	Began as informal tent clusters; reorganized into a grid layout (96–100 m <sup>2</sup> plots). Refugees expanded horizontally and vertically, resulting in dense, maze-like streets.	Developed in two phases: the "Old Camp" (self-organized) and a grid-based "New Extension" (12 districts). Refugees rearranged caravans to form courtyards and commercial corridors.
Housing	Evolved from tents to prefabricated asbestos shelters, later replaced by multi-storey concrete houses ("Dar"). Poor ventilation and dampness remain issues.	Progressed from tents to prefabricated caravans made of polyurethane panels. Refugees expanded units with self-built kitchens, toilets, and additional rooms.
Services	18 UNRWA schools and 4 public schools; 2 UNRWA health centers plus 51 private clinics. Most households now have private sanitation and kitchens.	32 formal schools and 8 primary healthcare centers plus 1 hospital. Communal toilets and kitchens largely replaced by private facilities.
Infrastructure	Recently integrated into municipal water, electricity, and sewage networks, but aging and inefficient. Waste collection remains poor; many narrow and dead-end roads.	Powered by a 2017 solar plant. Water supplied via tankers; incomplete sewage system; solid waste managed through a recycling project since 2015.
Social and Economic	Strong kinship networks; 2 sports clubs, 2 women's centers, and 1,700 small scale businesses. About 32% live below the poverty line.	58 community centers, several recreation areas, and 3,000+ shops. Work permits introduced in select sectors; two thirds of residents live below the poverty line.
Main Issues	Overcrowding, substandard housing, aging infrastructure, poor waste management, and lack of open spaces.	Remote location, poor infrastructure (especially water and sewage), thermal discomfort, and high unemployment.

*Note. Data compiled from UNHCR (2022, 2023), UNRWA (2022), and Chatelard (2020).*

Although both camps differ in their origins and ages, they share the same dynamic, the progressive adaptation of temporary spaces into semi permanent urban forms. The resulting process, dependent on the influence of refugee agency, demographic expansion and humanitarian constraints, reveals the implicit tension between short term orientation of humanitarian planning and long term realities of protracted displacement (Aburamadan, 2022; Herz, 2020). Refugees in both cases have improvised, extended, and reconfigured their physical spaces to more closely match their socio-cultural practices and daily needs and transformed emergency relief settlements into operational urban ecosystems.

Legacies that are typical of both cases include spatial isolation and security restrictions, as well as the initial failure to integrate with host communities (UNHCR, 2023; Alnsour and Meaton, 2021). However, as time has passed, these limitations have been actively negotiated by refugees, self constructed enhancements, economic ventures and social organization. Although these adaptive changes are usually informal and unofficial, they demonstrate the constraints of dogmatic humanitarian standards of design and show the need to develop participatory and context sensitive planning processes that consider the dynamic aspects of displacement.

### **3.2 Spatial and Physical Organization**

In the spatial dimension, both Baqa and Zaatari were initially designed in grid based structures, which is a characteristic of humanitarian design that would guarantee efficiency, accessibility, and control (Corsellis and Vitale, 2005; UNHCR, 2023). Nevertheless, the actual results of such designs have also differed greatly due to dissimilarities in administration, population strain, and time span.

At Baqa'a, the grid system initiated by the UNRWA in the late 1960s had standardized plots (around 96 to 100 m<sup>2</sup> per family), but was quickly lost under population increase and self-building. The refugees started to expand their shelter horizontally and later vertically, creating more rooms, staircases and semi private courtyards. These informal extensions, as time passed, distorted the original grid geometry and substituted the line structure with organic and irregular urban fabric (Rueff & Viaro, 2009; Maqusi, 2021). The use of tented asbestos structures in making up multi-story concrete housing structures goes to show how the spatial morphology of the camp was transformed by the uniformity of its design to the complex self-organization, both in resilience and neglect.

In comparison, the grid plan developed by Zaatari was developed under the influence of the modern humanitarian spatial logic. Its twelve administrative districts and orthogonal street system were set to be deployed quickly and with controlled management during the Syrian crisis (Dalal et al., 2018; Albadra et al., 2018). Although such a layout allowed the ease of logistics and emergency services, it overlooked both cultural and environmental conditions of the refugees, such as the necessity of family clustering, social privacy, and climate responsiveness. Soon, refugees changed the space by arranging the caravans into U-shaped groups, introducing courtyards, and shaded communal spaces. These changes discontinued the original grid to create a hybrid morphology that was half controlled by the top and half adapted by the bottom, illustrating a negotiation between the top down control and bottom up adaptation (Mouris Hanna, 2021; Herz, 2020);<sup>2</sup>

The spatial metamorphosis within the two camps highlights one of the most notable trends in humanitarian settlements across the globe: whereas planning is standardized, spatial change is bound to adhere to the social logic of the residents and not to the technical logic of the planners (Kennedy, 2005; Aburamadan et al., 2020). The fact that Baqa'a becomes an informal though permanent urban quarter of greater Amman is a contrast to the still bound yet more self organizing settlement of Zaatari.

### **3.3 Governance and Institutional Frameworks**

Baqa and Zaatari are governed by two opposite humanitarian paradigms: the agency centered model of UNRWA and the multi stakeholder coordination model of UNHCR. These frameworks not only define how aid and services are provided to refugees, but they also influence the autonomy of refugees, their involvement, and integration into host societies in the long term (Herz, 2020; Chatelard, 2020).

With a single agency rule of UNRWA, Baqa'a Camp has developed over a period of five decades to become a quasi municipal settlement within the Jordanian administrative environment. Even though the area was meant to be a relief site on a short term basis, over time, Baqa was integrated into the larger urban network of Amman. The stable service delivery in education, healthcare, and sanitation was made possible by the long term existence of UNRWA, with the limitation of chronic underfunding and the ageing infrastructure (UNRWA, 2022). The presence of UNRWA, the Jordanian Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA), and municipal authorities resulted in the overlapping jurisdiction but also in a possibility of

partial assimilation of refugees in the national system, as refugees were able to receive public education, utilities, and local markets (Al Husseini, 2010; Alnsour and Meaton, 2021).

In contrast, in Zaatari, there is a hybrid form of governance between the government of Jordan, the government represented by the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) and UNHCR and 50 humanitarian agencies. This is a multi layered coordination system that is divided into working groups based on sectors to facilitate cross agency cooperation and specialization (UNHCR, 2023). It, however, also creates complex bureaucracy and disjointed accountability (Jaber & Nashwan, 2022). The restrictive control measures, which include movement permits, security enforced borders, are indicative of a form of governance that revolves more around containment than integration.

Although UNRWA has achieved flexibility in administration in Baqa'a through the centralization of its administration, which led to an informal autonomy and gradual urbanization, UNHCR has ensured a controlled humanitarian enclave through its pluralized administration in Zaatari. The comparative governance study therefore proves that protracted displacement questions the legitimacy of the old models of emergency management. An enhanced participatory and responsive governance system that merges the refugees, local governments, and humanitarian stakeholders is required to convert camps into areas of assistance to areas of coexistence and development.

### **3.4 Housing Evolution and Infrastructure**

Baqa'a and Zaatari have both originated as tented communities, but their physical transformation over decades has taken a strikingly similar path: tents to prefabricated shelters to self constructed permanent homes (Aburamadan et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2022). Self built concrete houses soon replaced the original prefabricated units (12 m<sup>2</sup> each, asbestos walls, zinc roofs) in Baqa, where refugees wanted to find a permanent residence and better living conditions. Gradually, families extended their houses in horizontal and vertical directions, building multi story houses (most commonly three to four floors) with different floor plans ranging between 90 and 190 m<sup>2</sup> (Alnsour and Meaton, 2021). Although these changes have increased durability and privacy, they have also caused structural risks because of non-engineered construction and unregulated building (Al-Betawi et al., 2020). The majority of houses are not insulated or waterproofed which leads to dampness and respiratory health problems. However, the

development of the Baqa'a typology of Dar combinations of traditional Arab courtyard houses and incremental self-build structures exemplifies that cultural perpetuation and acculturation coexist in the environment of refugees (Maqusi, 2021; Fafo, 2014).

In Zaatari, the transition was performed in a significantly shorter time frame, but in a more structured context. After tents were replaced by prefabricated caravans between 2013 and 2015, refugees started restructuring their shelters by creating closed courtyards by stacking several caravans, extending rooms and having their own kitchen and toilets (Mouris Hanna, 2021; Dorai and Piraud-Fournet, 2018). The self help construction intersected with the humanitarian design at this stage of the refugee led adaptation. Although the standardized caravans offered immediate safety, their thin steel frames were very insulating and lacked ventilation, and while they could withstand extreme temperatures, their construction urged the refugees to innovate due to the constraints imposed by the material supplied (Albadra et al., 2018).

Both camps can be compared in terms of the infrastructure, which reflects their development as a combination of premeditated organizations, and improvisations. The infrastructure of Baqa'a has become more interconnected with municipal networks, such as electricity and water, but sewage and stormwater networks are still quite old fashioned and overloaded (UNRWA, 2022b). Conversely, the infrastructure in Zaatari is also under humanitarian management, where there is partial development on sustainability. In 2017, a solar power plant became the first significant step towards the implementation of renewable energy in humanitarian environments, allowing electricity to reach every shelter and correspond to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNHCR, 2022; Zarrug and Shtiwi, 2020). Nevertheless, the inefficiency of water management, the use of tanks in their operations, the weakness in the infrastructure of protracted environments, and ongoing problems in accessing water demonstrate the vulnerability of temporary infrastructure (Wardeh & Marques, 2021).

The long term planning should therefore incorporate gradual upgrading plans, technical support and community involvement in that, which will help them to bridge the gap between the emergency relief and the sustainable urban living.

### **3.5 Social and Economic Dynamics**

Baqa'a and Zaatari depict that refugee camps are dynamic social ecosystems where refugees reconstruct community structures and informal

economies to manage the situation of long term displacement (Herz, 2020; Chatelard, 2020).

### 3.5.1 Baqa'a: Integration and Informal Urban Livelihoods

Fifty years of permanence in Baqa have enabled Palestinian refugees to have strong community networks and strong informal economies. The extended family is still the social basis of camp life that determines both the spatial layout and social interactions (Aburamadan, 2022; Encyclopedia of Palestinian Camps, n.d.). Multi generational families tend to live in one building, which strengthens the spirit of unity, yet contributes to overcrowding. Over time, women have been extending their social spaces by semi-private adjacencies like courtyards and balconies, making domestic thresholds a focal point of day to day interaction (Al-Betawi et al., 2020).

Baqa is the informal economy of their lifeline. The camp hosts over 1700 small businesses such as grocery stores, artisanal workshops, bakeries, and pharmacies, which are a rich source of local livelihood and linked to the surrounding urban economy (UNRWA, 2022b; DPA, n.d.). Even though the majority of Palestinian refugees are citizens of Jordan, opportunities to work in government supported jobs are rare. In turn, this is because informal trade and self employment prevail, which form a strong yet dangerous economic pattern. The poverty and unemployment rate are still high (32% below the national poverty line), but the economic dynamism of the camp provides an example of how refugees can go beyond the aid dependency condition, as long as they have the relative mobility and local integration (Fafo, 2014; Alnsour and Meaton, 2021).

### 3.5.2 Zaatari: Humanitarian Economy and Emerging Self-Reliance

In Zaatari, the younger refugee population has established an equally lively but more restricted informal economy that is regulated by the humanitarian. Although there were initial limitations on movement and employment, Syrians quickly formed more than 3,000 small enterprises in the camp, especially in the so called "Champs-Élysée Street", a symbolic avenue of self organization and self employment (Ledwith, 2014; UNHCR, 2022). The appearance of restaurants, tailors, shops, and mobile phone vendors reflects the appearance of an internal market, which resembles small town economic organizations.

A major shift in policy is the Jordan Compact (2016), which provided work permits to Syrian refugees in specific industries like agriculture and construction, in addition to marking a step in partial economic inclusion (Wardeh & Marques, 2021).

Nevertheless, other challenges still exist, such as gender differences, poor access to formal jobs, and reliance on humanitarian cash subsidies. Approximately two thirds of camp residents live below the poverty line, which means that there is still no economic self sufficiency, and it is not a short term goal (Aburamadan et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2023).

Kinship based clustering, community centres and collective cultural activities have helped in maintaining social cohesion in Zaatari. As of 2022, UNHCR and partner organizations had 58 community centres, where they utilize their psychosocial support, educate, and train people on jobs (UNHCR, 2022). The U-shaped caravan clusters have courtyards and shared areas, which are micro communities of neighbourhood identity and promote collective resilience and cultural continuity (Dorai and Piraud-Fournet 2018).

### 3.5.3 Analytical Insight

The comparison shows that there are two different socio economic paradigms: the integrative urban economy of Baqa and the humanitarian enclave economy of Zaatari. The camp delimiting activities have been eroded gradually at Baqa'a, which made it easier to integrate the camp with the nearby city, whereas at Zaatari, dependence structures have been maintained through physical and administrative isolation (Herz, 2020; Chatelard, 2020).

## 3.6 Challenges and Planning Implications

Although the development of Baqa'a and Zaatari camps into self-organized settlements is a positive development, the camps are still characterized by systemic issues in infrastructure, governance, and sustainability issues. The humanitarian planning short term issues highlighted by these challenges reflect the ongoing disconnect between the short term humanitarian planning and the long term developmental requirements of protracted refugee situations (UNHCR, 2023).

### 3.6.1 Environmental and Spatial Challenges

The desert environment in Zaatari, Jordan, in the North is a major environmental limitation. Overheat in summer (more than 40 °C), freezing in winter, and frequent sandstorms influence the physical stability of shelters and the well being of residents (Albadra et al., 2018). The scarcity of vegetation and proximity to urban hubs make remote areas even more remote and reliant on external logistics (Awwad, 2018; Aburamadan, 2017). Despite being more urbanized, Baqa'a is experiencing the other end of the overcrowding problem. Practically all the available

land is occupied, which means that there are very few open or recreational areas and fewer possibilities of upgrading in the future (Al-Betawi et al., 2020).

### 3.6.2 Infrastructure and Housing Issues

The infrastructure in the two camps is below population requirements. Baqa was also characterized by decaying sewage systems, clogged drainage, and improper extensions, which diminish accessibility of roads (UNRWA, 2022b). In Zaatari, water shortage and trash handling still remain sharp issues even though innovative steps like the solar power station of 2017 have been promoted. Residents are subjected to health risks and environmental degradation due to the reliance on tankers in water delivery and the usage of septic waste disposal (Wardeh & Marques, 2021; UNHCR, 2023).

Another issue is housing quality. Self constructed concrete houses in Baqa'a are structurally weak, have poor ventilation, and become subject to damp environments that cause respiratory illnesses (Al-Betawi et al., 2020). Although standardized, the prefabricated caravans made by Zaatari are not comfortable enough thermally and securely and require improvised systems to supply electricity and gas, exposing people to multiple accidents (Al-Hunaiti et al., 2018; Herz, 2020).

### 3.6.3 Socio Economic and Security Issues

Unemployment, poverty, and limited mobility keep creating dependency and the psychosocial stressors, particularly in Zaatari, where movement allowances are highly controlled (Chatelard, 2020). The residents of Baqa'a are partly integrated into the urban environment, but structural marginalization is caused by underfunding and inadequate provision of services to the population. There are also social tensions, domestic violence, and inequality in accessing the services, which remain in both camps (Wardeh & Marques, 2021; UNHCR, 2022).

### 3.6.4 Analytical Implications

The transition of Baqa'a and Zaatari, therefore, demands the shift of paradigm instead of camp management to urban development of refugees, one that is inclusive of housing improvement, service enrichment, livelihood creation, and participatory governance in a comprehensive long-term planning vision (Herz, 2020; UNHCR, 2023).

## 3.7 *Synthesis: Towards Sustainable Humanitarian Urbanism*

Baqa'a and Zaatari demonstrate that refugee camps transform into temporary urban communities

as a result of the interplay between institutional planning and adaptation driven by refugees that makes difficult to distinguish between temporary and permanent settlement (Herz, 2020; Aburamadan, 2022).

### 3.7.1 From Relief to Urbanity

Baqa is also a vivid example of how an urban ecosystem is changing the emergency camp model because of long term displacement into Zaatari. More than fifty years later, Baqa'a is currently a dense and completely urbanized settlement with municipal ties, diversified livelihoods, and multi story buildings (UNRWA, 2022b). The development of it shows how displacement became urbanized in its turn, not through institutional planning but through improvisation, endurance, and adjustment as a collective phenomenon (Maqusi, 2021; Chatelard, 2020).

Zaatari is considerably younger; however, he reflects this process in a humanitarian system that was originally meant to be effective and controlled. The shift of the camp to tents to building their own compounds and the development of businesses, community facilities, and social areas are evidence of an urbanism growing and developing out of necessity, which is bottom-up (UNHCR, 2023). All these paths highlight the unavoidable permanence in crises of long duration and the incapacity of temporarily paradigms of humanitarianism to foresee the ability to inhabit in the long term.

### 3.7.2 Policy and Planning Lessons

Humanitarian and urban planners could gain valuable insights through the experience of both camps. First, there must be flexibility in camp design. The existence of standardized grids and strict zoning rules tends to override local cultural logics and result in unsustainable spatial morphologies (Kennedy, 2005; Corsellis and Vitale, 2005). Adaptive planning models, which enable incremental growth, family grouping, and evolution through mixed use, should be embraced in humanitarian agencies, and this has been envisioned in self-organized reconfigurations in Zaatari and Baqa'a.

Second, it is essential to have governance integration. Humanitarian and national administrative dualism has resulted in inefficient accountability and resource allocation. The situation in Jordan demonstrates the necessity of hybrid governance that integrates humanitarian coordination and municipal inclusion, and community engagement (Herz, 2020; Alnsour and Meaton, 2021). The agency and sustainability would be empowered by engaging the refugees in

participatory planning involving representation in the camp committees and local planning activities.

Third, the sustainability of infrastructure and services should no longer be donor-based but resilience based. The implementation of the Zaatari solar power plant (2017) and the recycling programs is an example of how environmentally friendly interventions can save money and create local capacity (Zarrug & Shtiwi, 2020; UNHCR, 2022). These efforts should, however, be scaled with integrated urban upgrading structures, which link camps to national energy, water and waste systems.

Lastly, sustainable solutions are based on social and economic inclusion. Partial citizenship and economic participation have helped to promote normalization and diversification of livelihoods as seen in Baqa'a. Other models like the Jordan Compact of Syrian refugees can be implemented as transitional tools between humanitarian aid and long term development (Wardeh and Marques, 2021; UNHCR, 2023).

### 3.7.3 Analytical Reflection

Sustainable humanitarian urbanism demands that planners, policymakers and architects cross institutional borders, be visionary in their designs, and regard refugees as co-creators of their own spaces rather than passive consumers (Aburamadan et al., 2020; Herz, 2020)..

The paradigm shift coincides with the new discourse in the global refugee policy, suggesting area based planning, inclusive infrastructure, and co development models of refugee hosts (UNHCR, 2023; Chatelard, 2020). By balancing the humanitarian needs with the principles of sustainable urban planning, the host nations, such as Jordan, would be able to transform the camps into sources of social, spatial and economic innovation. This synthesis is carried on to the conclusion, which highlights the policy implications of the long term planning, participatory governance, and context sensitive design of future refugee settlements.

**Data Availability Statement:** This study is based on secondary data and publicly available reports. No primary datasets were generated or analyzed during this research.

**Author contribution:** Create conceptualization of the study, case study selection, comparative analysis, findings interpretation, and writing original draft preparation and review were performed by the author.

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## 4. CONCLUSION

The growing scale and duration of forced displacement demand a fundamental rethinking of how refugee settlements are planned, designed, and governed. Refugee camps can no longer be understood as temporary humanitarian solutions but must be recognized as evolving urban systems whose residents require dignity, safety, and long term socio economic opportunities. The comparative analysis of Baqa'a and Zaatari demonstrates that, despite their distinct historical, political, and institutional contexts, both camps exhibit clear trajectories of self organization and incremental urbanization. In Baqa'a, decades of permanence have resulted in dense, multi storey urban fabric integrated into the wider metropolitan system, while in Zaatari, refugee led adaptations of standardized shelters have rapidly generated functional spatial, social, and economic structures. These processes highlight refugee agency and challenge the conventional humanitarian perception of camps as passive spaces of aid dependency. At the same time, the findings reveal the limitations of emergency oriented planning frameworks, such as standardized layouts and short term infrastructure provision, which often fail to respond to local environmental, cultural, and socio economic conditions. Such approaches produce long term inefficiencies, spatial inequities, and costly retroactive interventions. Addressing protracted displacement therefore requires a shift from emergency management toward development oriented planning grounded in sustainable urbanism, participatory governance, and socio economic inclusion. Ultimately, sustainable humanitarian planning must acknowledge the permanence of long term displacement and support the transformation of refugee camps into resilient, integrated, and livable urban neighborhoods. By aligning humanitarian principles with urban planning strategies, host countries can better harness refugee settlements as spaces of social stability, spatial innovation, and shared development.

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