Interlude
Syrians in Jordan and the Construction of Camps

'You can stay here in your grandfather's house, but we are going back to Syria', my mother told me during a visit to Amman in October 2011. The Syrian war was still young, and had only started a few months earlier in March of the same year. It was clear, even back then, that no 'good outcome' could be expected in the near future. While many cities were experiencing minor tensions and were preparing their streets and neighbourhoods for what would become unexpectedly horrifying battlefields, witnessed by a global audience, cities such as Homs, where I grew up, were already changing more dramatically. Parts of Homs had been bombed, people were being arrested, neighbourhoods were destroyed and the surrounding villages were besieged. With no realistically feasible solution in sight, Syria was becoming a sombre place.

In Jordan, the arrival of displaced Syrians fluctuated over the years. Being a Jordanian citizen, I had no problem in crossing the border back to Jordan. Syrians were also allowed into Jordan during the first years of the conflict and were, at least initially, welcomed by the Jordanian society. Interestingly, the notion of 'Syrian refugee-ness' had yet to be born. From a Jordanian perspective, Syrians were to be welcomed, as they were perceived as victims fleeing from war. In Amman, the majority of Syrians relocating to the Jordanian capital were either businesspeople trying to rescue their capital, or people working in politics — including those who claimed to be 'activists', as well as politicians who belonged to what was known as the 'Syrian opposition'. Others were Syrians who had already been working in Jordan before the war and were therefore accustomed to its different and somewhat 'neoliberal' lifestyle. Most of these Syrians had come from Homs or cities in the Syrian south, while cities such as Damascus and Aleppo had not yet been badly affected. Although the presence of Syrians in Amman had been gradually increasing over the years, it was thus the northern part of Jordan where a sequence of dramatic events was taking place, setting the stage for what was to follow.

To date, the influx of Syrians to the northern part of Jordan remains poorly documented. It has often been suggested that many Syrians chose to settle in the north of Jordan due to strong familial, cultural and economic ties. Most of them

had not fled their home country for the same political or economic reasons that had motivated their peers in Amman, but because their villages, towns and cities were being destroyed by the raging war. They had literally been made homeless, and had fled under vulnerable circumstances, often without official documents such as a passport or ID card. It was the arrival of this particular group that marked the beginning of Syrians' problematic path in Jordan.

The story began on 18 April 2012, when the UNHCR suddenly declared the need to direct all humanitarian activities to the north, 'beyond Amman' (UNHCR 2012b, 1). The reason for this abrupt and dramatic requirement was the overcrowding in a refugee accommodation centre in Ramtha city called Al-Bashabsheh — a refugee space that had been growing, away from the eyes of humanitarian NGOs that were more prestigiously located in Amman. Between April 2011 and 2012, undocumented Syrians arriving in Jordan were taken to Ramtha, and to a residential complex made up of seven identical buildings. The complex was named after its owner, Nidal Al Bashabsheh, who in a YouTube interview declared his intention to donate this complex for the souls of all Muslims. In the video, his donation was also portrayed as an act of patriotism, as Nidal was helping the Jordanian government to accommodate this particular group, thereby compensating for a lack of other solutions at the time. While the exact relationship between Nidal and the government remains unclear, the residential complex served as the first 'refugee space', from which all the other Syrian camps in Jordan emerged.

Initially, and in order to legalize their presence in the kingdom, undocumented Syrians would be bailed out by a Jordanian *Kafīl* (sponsor), who needed to be over 35 years old, financially sound and willing to pay symbolic fees to free Syrians from their temporary detention in the complex (NRC 2016). The implementation of this policy remained vague and poorly documented. However, it appears that it remained operational until 2014, when the Jordanian government started to work on stabilizing the population in camps and preventing undocumented and reversed migration to cities. To revisit the matter of Al Bashabsheh, the use of the Kafala system generated economic dynamics and produced what was referred to as 'bailout lords', exploiting Syrians by pressurizing them to pay money in order to get out of the camp. As explained by a Syrian who was bailed out from the complex, 'some people lived there for more than four or five months […] because they didn't have anyone [relatives or acquaintances] or couldn't find a *Kafīl* […] where would they go? I was lucky enough to have relatives who sponsored me to get me out'. Due to the dysfunction of the Kafala system and the increasing numbers of Syrians without documents, the site was becoming alarmingly overcrowded. In another YouTube video, Nidal declared that around 40,000 Syrians had passed through Al Bashabsheh, with it hosting 3000 people at once at its peak.

The overcrowding in the Al Bashabsheh complex was a turning point in the course of events. For the first time, the 'Syrian refugee' had become visible and

locatable, and thus needed an immediate humanitarian intervention. Up to that point, Syrians had not been registered as refugees in Jordan, which had not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention but agreed on a memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR. When the first Syrians were hosted in the Al Bashabsheh complex in April 2011, the UNHCR counted only five or fifteen *registered* Syrian refugees in all of Jordan (the statistics vary). During this period, many Syrians relied on humanitarian assistance from both local and international organizations, yet they avoided registering as refugees. For one reason, Syrians did not perceive themselves as refugees during the first years of the crisis. The term 'refugee' was always linguistically associated with the loss of home, and therefore the Palestinians were the only refugees Syrians had intimate knowledge of. The other reason for their reluctance was that Syrians had inherited a mistrust of international institutions from the Syrian regime. 'Foreign' institutions such as the UNHCR, UNRWA, Red Cross, and so on, were all considered to have external agendas and were therefore deemed untrustworthy. This explains why Syrians in Jordan were very hesitant to register as refugees (see for example Un Ponte Per 2012). Nonetheless, with increasing numbers of Syrians crossing the Jordanian border every day, especially from late 2012 up to mid-2013, pressure started to mount to register all Syrians in Jordan as refugees. As warned: 'for those not registered, there is no free-of-charge access to the public health and education systems or eligibility for WFP food vouchers and UNHCR cash assistance' (JRC and IFRC 2012, 6).

The events unfolding at Al Bashabsheh posed an urgent question: where should the increasing numbers of 'illegal' Syrians be accommodated? The complex offered a temporary 'grey zone' (Yiftachel 2009), in which legality was negotiated through the Kafala system, but this was insufficient. Not all the Syrians were able to find a *Kafil*, and the complex was becoming crowded. The need for spatial solutions became both apparent and compelling. Local organizations such as 'Al Kitab Wal Sunna' involved in supporting refugees — mostly based on religious affiliations — started to search for sites to reduce the pressure on Al Bashabsheh. The local news media, for instance, reported that 'Al Kitab Wal Sunna' had proposed to refurbish an old hangar and a building within the QIZ (Quality Industrial Zone) outside Irbid, which was ultimately turned into a special camp called Cyber City to detain Palestinians from Syria. The UNHCR documents mention a stadium, which was temporarily used to accommodate male Syrians, later known as 'single travellers'. Other sources also refer to the involvement of Gulf-based organizations in the process of relocation. For example, a colleague who worked with a Saudi campaign at the beginning of the crisis told me that an offer of support was made to the UNHCR during a visit to the Al Bashabsheh complex by a Saudi royal. This led to a joint decision to refurbish an abandoned park in Irbid to relocate Syrians. The result was the construction of a small camp known as the King Abdullah Park. Eventually, the

Al Bashabsheh complex was closed in September 2012, but the influx of Syrians was far from over.

Away from the dynamic 'humanitarian bubble' that had started to expand around the arrival of undocumented Syrians in Jordan, the scenario was enfolding differently in many of Jordan's cities. Between 2011 and 2014, Syrians with valid passports were still be able to cross the border and settle in cities and villages wherever they found lodging. Yet although Jordan maintained an 'open door' policy towards Syrians, crossing the border was not as straightforward as it sounded. The Jordanian government gradually became aware of a 'mass' displacement taking place, without any prospect of control or the mechanisms for it. Some people were made to wait for few days at the border, present further documents or contact acquaintances in Amman before being able to cross over. However, this did not affect the flow of Syrians without documentation (or '*sans-papiers*'), who did not enter Jordan through the official border check points.

The increase in the number of Syrians settling in cities and villages — or what the UNHCR prefers to call 'urban refugees' — was accelerating. In small and underdeveloped cities such as Ramtha and Mafraq, the impact soon became visible. Families would build additional rooms on roofs, rent out garages, enclose their gardens on ground floors and refurbish old storage spaces to accommodate Syrians not able to find housing in the city (Alshadfan 2015). In some cases, Syrian families were offered living space on farmland if they were willing to build their own housing. 'These houses can be easily spotted as they lack a concrete frame', explained an urban planner appointed by the Municipality of Zaatari village. This resulted in the emergence of 125 informal settlements scattered around the peripheries of cities (NRC 2014), and a drastic increase in rental prices. The *Wohnungsfrage* ('housing question'),[1] suddenly became central to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan: Where could the increasing numbers of Syrians be accommodated? There could, of course, never be a simple answer to this question; yet it emphasized the need to develop a *spatial* strategy.

The city continued to be the site of unprecedented contestations. The unplanned accumulation of Syrians in underdeveloped cities, including Ramtha, Irbid and Mafraq, started to have further effects on their infrastructures, such as public services, the education and health system, the real estate market, the economy and the labour market. Schools started to become overcrowded and job opportunities decreased, as Syrians were willing to work for lower salaries (especially in the fields of construction, catering, farming and the service industry). Economic competition

1 *Zur Wohnungsfrage* is a series of essays published by Fredrich Engels in 1872. In them, he puts forward the question of modern 'housing' vis-à-vis the politics of the state, capitalism and the conditions of the labor force. This discussion was connected to the refugee crisis through the writings of Andrew Herscher (2017).

increased in a country that already suffered from a lack of resources — a situation that transformed the perception of Syrians from being war victims to being a threat. This process was compounded by feelings of injustice and resentment among Jordan's marginalized communities in the north, who watched on as relief organizations from all over the world came to the 'rescue' of the Syrians, while leaving them behind. Institutions, ranging in power and size from the trans-national UNHCR, WFP and IOM, through the smaller NRC and DRC, to the local JHCO and others, started to open offices in the north, and foreign expats and international relief workers would be seen roaming around the underdeveloped parts of the Jordanian north. Amidst these transformations and the ongoing economic strife, local sentiment concluded that the Syrians were to blame. As one report suggested, the sight of Syrians selling their standardized relief assistance, 'has generated resentment, and the impression that Syrians are doing quite well, much better, in fact, than the majority of local residents' (Mercy Corps 2013, 9).

In light of these developments, the decision was taken to open an official Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. The Jordanian government had insisted on taking this step (UNHCR 2013a, 9), as it faced significant pressure from tribal leaders in the north who supported the idea (Turner 2015, 392). There was also an overwhelming result of a public survey (75%) in favour of opening camps for Syrians (CSS 2013, 7), thereby 'restricting [their] access to the territory' (UN 2013, 139). Moreover, the opening of a refugee camp provided an opportunity to visualize the refugee crisis — giving it a name, a location and shape. This approach was considered as a way to attract external funding and further economic support to the kingdom (Mercy Corps 2013). At the time, 35,000 Syrians were registered as refugees at the UNHCR, and the organization was struggling to depopulate the 'transit camps' that it had created earlier in Jordan's north, as well as to coordinate the daunting humanitarian crisis that was enfolding in the entire country. While the camps (Zaatari, and later the Emirati-Jordanian and Azraq camps) made it easier for humanitarian organizations to assist refugees, it should be mentioned that around 75 per cent of Syrians continued to live in urban areas. In 2020, the UNHCR counted around 650,000 registered Syrians in the Kingdom, most of whom were living in Amman, Irbid, Mafraq and Zarqa. By comparison, only around 125,000 were living in camps.

To return to our story, on 9 July 2012, the Council of Ministers finally approved the decision to open the first official Syrian refugee camps in Jordan (UNHCR 2012a), marking 45 years on from the opening of the last Palestinian camp in Jordan — a country ultimately made up of refugees and camps. Nineteen days later, attended by government officials, ambassadors, journalists, representatives of the UN and INGOs, philanthropists and military forces, Zaatari camp was inaugurated in a ceremonial event.

A satellite image of Zaatari camp in 2017, made up of various zoomed-in stills

Source: Author's own, based on Google Earth.