

From Camps to Urban Refugees: Reflections on Research Agendas

The Syrian Refugee Crisis has cast a spotlight on an issue that has grown over several decades-that of forced migration of millions of people, particularly in the Global South-East. A glance at the numbers illuminates the sheer scale of the issue- nearly 60 million people being forcibly displaced globally¹, to which the Syrians contribute approximately 9 million². The crisis, and the response to it by Europe and other western countries, has also illuminated what scholars have long-pointed out- that the mass warehousing of refugees is first and foremost a 'Third World problem' or a 'problem of developing countries' (Malkki, 1995). It is a product of the geopolitics of asylum, restricted immigration, and xenophobia of the Global North-West, limited capacities and existential anxieties of host countries in the Global South-East³ and the increasingly protracted nature of displacement. Emerging through this, we see the sequestration of millions of Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (and other countries in the Middle East) in camps and urban areas⁴.

As with earlier waves of refugees, camps that were set up to be 'temporary' have evolved into what some see as 'cities'. Zaatari in Jordan housing over 80,000 people is held up as the key example of this as its numbers make it one of the most populated areas in Jordan. However, most refugees are not living in the camps, but in urban areas throughout the country⁵. In fact, the Syrian crisis, in countries such as Lebanon is an urban crisis, and perhaps offers an opportunity for urbanists to take the question of urban refugees much more seriously.

It is perhaps prudent to note here that urban discussions of refugees are neither new, nor novel. Historians, refugee studies and development scholars, alongside various other academics have studied refugees in urban contexts but often without a clear exploration of the urban dimensions of refuge. Even from a policy perspective, it has only been recently

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>

² <http://syrianrefugees.eu/>

³ As (Watson, 2013; Yiftachel, 2006) amongst others note, the categories of Global North and Global South, or even categories of Global North-West or South-East remain awkward and problematic. They fail to capture the considerable unevenness of wealth, power, development etc between and within countries and regions of the world.

⁴ It is important to note camps that are larger and have been around for longer, for example, Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, which has over 300,000 refugees mainly from Somalia, making it the largest camp in the world. This has also been around for over 20 years.

⁵ Crisp, J. (2015) Zaatari: A Camp and Not a City. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/blog/zaatari-camp-and-not-city>

(2009) that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized the scale and complexity of urban refugees and refocused its attention on it⁶ (Darling, 2016).

The reticence of UNHCR, a key player in the global 'management' of refugees as well as many host countries in taking on the urban issue has perhaps played an important role in the limited academic focus on this issue.

In my earlier piece in *IJURR* (Sanyal 2014), I insisted against an approach that reduced refugees to bare life, suggesting that it is through their micro politics of squatting and occupying land, building shelters against the dictates of the state and the like that offer ways of understanding how they exercise agency. I posited that we need to see refugee spaces not merely as sites of containment and management but as sites of contestation, of creating particular identities. I further suggested that it is important when studying refugees, particularly within urban environments, to think critically about the ways in which they are positioned against the urban poor. A comparison across the two groups raises important questions about the politics of citizenship in postcolonial states. I remain committed to these ideas, but I suggest a few further points of consideration.

The first is to take more seriously the urban nature of forced displacement, especially as most refugees move to urban areas instead of camps. This is not to abandon the study of camps, but to not consider it as the only site through which questions of forced displacement and its management can be understood. In fact, the urbanization of refugees poses critical questions for how processes of urbanization may unfold in countries. For example, in Lebanon, a 'no-camp policy' by the government driven by an anxious history with Palestinian camps has meant that the 1.3 million Syrians in the country of 4 million Lebanese have largely moved into urban areas or into informal tented settlements in rural areas. This has not only placed tremendous pressure on already weak infrastructure but affected the complex governance of the country as well. Hundreds of humanitarian agencies and other civil society organizations have been working on the Syrian crisis, providing important services and goods such as water, sanitation, shelter, protection (legal) services, education, healthcare and so forth. The crisis and its response has thus affected the physical nature of urban, semi-urban and rural environments.

Working within urban environments has also meant that such services cannot be provided to refugees alone as many Lebanese within the host communities are equally if not poorer than the Syrians. It has also meant that over time, far greater coordination has been needed between different aid agencies and civil society organizations and between them and the Lebanese government. The recent Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (2015-16) has explicitly highlighted the need for cooperation between humanitarian organizations and the state at different scales- the national, the regional and the municipal. Lebanon thus provides an important lens to understand the coming-together of humanitarian aid and urban planning and becomes an important site through which the urbanization of forced migration can be understood. Other spaces around the world offer equally important and perhaps different urban discussions as well.

⁶ Note that UNHCR had published an earlier urban policy paper in 1997, where it refused assistance to urban refugees.

My second suggestion is to interrogate more carefully the relationship between refugees and the host states. In my earlier piece I suggested exploring “the brutality and informality of the postcolonial state in its relationship with its subaltern subjects, of which refugees are but one member” (Sanyal 2014: 562) This merits perhaps closer attention, particularly as we study forced migration. The relationship between refugees and the host states may be deeply problematic, but needs to be understood in all its complexities. If hundreds of thousands or millions of people are displaced into a country for a long period of time, what is the responsibility of the host state towards them, particularly as there is little effort by the international community to resolve the crisis and worse, cut the funding for them?

All countries are bound by customary international law not to return (in legal terminology: *refouler*) refugees to situations where their lives may be in danger. But as we see more refugee situations becoming protracted, how should the host state manage them? It is useful here to think about informality as a key mode of managing displacement. Countries such as Lebanon may put legal mechanisms in place to restrict the migration of Syrians across the border, to register as refugees, to limit access to the labour market and so forth. Yet, there is a temporal nature to these legal mechanisms which are also enforced in an ad hoc fashion. Refugees may be found breaking the law by being in the country illegally and may be threatened with deportation, but as a country that abides by the principle of non-*refoulement*, it does not carry out large-scale deportations. The same applies to other laws that may be passed to restrict the rights of Syrians. The aim is to control what the country sees as an impossible situation whilst maintaining its international obligations.

The legal and political situation however may ultimately compel some Syrians to either ‘go back’ to Syria, ‘go forward’ to Turkey and Europe or ‘go underground’ by becoming undocumented and thus living in a precarious situation. This again has implications for different geographies, from the borders between countries, to the informal settlements in the Bekaa valley, urban neighbourhoods in Beirut and Tripoli that have seen large influxes of Syrian refugees, and detention centres that are produced through these webs of policies and state practices.

Finally, it is important to consider the complex interrelationships between refugees and host communities. As Cathrine Brun (2010) eloquently points out, it is necessary for us to understand the heterogeneity of host communities and the ways in which the arrival of displaced persons and humanitarian interventions, including policies into that environment affects the politics and ethics of hospitality and practices of social justice. Indeed, we cannot take shared identities for granted in conditions where host communities may be overwhelmed by refugees (Landau, 2003), but we cannot also assume that there will necessarily be conflicts between host communities and guests. These relationships, particularly within urban environments where interventions are more difficult to implement, and where informality, illegality, political geometries are immensely complex, makes the work of humanitarian assistance increasingly difficult and worthy of closer academic scrutiny.

In conclusion, while refugee camps and detention centres continue to be important sites to analyse, the urbanization of refugees merits far closer scrutiny by social scientists (Darling, 2016). There are important questions to be raised as we study this issue and take on board

the complexity of social, political, legal and spatial reconfigurations, particularly in host countries. It is of significance not just to academics interested in forced migration, but also to geographers and urbanists interested in thinking about urban futures. I have offered a glimpse from one country in the Global South-East, in the hope that more conversations from different contexts on this critical topic emerges in the coming years.

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