

## 7<sup>th</sup> i-Rec Conference 2015: Reconstruction and Recovery in Urban Contexts



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### Understanding Forms of Sheltering *by (and for)* Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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#### Abstract

There are more than 50 million refugees worldwide, a figure that has been significantly increased by the recent Syrian crisis. Having hosted thousands of Palestinian refugees sixty years ago, Lebanon, a neighboring country to Syria, recently received over one million Syrian refugees. It has thus become the nation with the largest percentage of refugees per population. In the past, Palestinian refugees were placed in temporary camps that evolved to become self-contained neighborhoods with their own governance structures. To avoid repeating the same experience, the Lebanese government seldom authorizes Syrian refugees to create transitory organized settlements. This has resulted in a large number of sheltering solutions and camps emerging informally all over the country. While humanitarian aid is often necessary for the survival of these refugees, several humanitarian institutions play a role largely based on (and legitimized by) control and power relations with the refugees. This paper assesses the different forms of Syrian refugee sheltering that now exist in Lebanon. By doing so, it reveals the variety of conditions in which these refugees live and the challenges they face. Data collected in two types of camps (through groups discussions, interviews and direct observations) help identify the forms of control and power adopted by humanitarian aid in organized (formal) camps. The results bring into light – but also raise questions about - the role of institutions and refugees in the process of sheltering Syrians in Lebanon.

**Keywords:** Syrian Refugees, Camps, Shelters, Lebanon, Power, Control.

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### Introduction

Sheltering is critical for survival in the initial stages of natural or man-made disasters (UNHABITAT, 2009). Humanitarian and governmental institutions often place forced displaced populations in “temporary” camps. According to Malkki (1995) “It was towards the end of World War II that the refugee camp became emplaced as a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of displacement” (Malkki, 1995). In fact, temporary camps were, and still are, a disguised device of power and control on many levels. They are based on public discipline in which strict rules determine people’s mobility, and access to medical, sanitary, and other services. They have become a device controlled by humanitarian institutions under the pretext of providing humanitarian aid and sheltering (Agier, 2008). Other types of sheltering such as informal settlements, transitional centers and transit zones of illegal immigrants, are also used to contain the often-undesirable refugee populations (Agier & Lecadet, 2014).

It is outlined in the literature that the appropriation of the territory depends on the degree of freedom, and the sense of belonging to (and ownership of) space. After forced displacement, social groups feel they are strangers in a territory or space they do not see as their own (Conference & Korosec-Serfaty, 1976). According to Stein (Stein, 1981), refugees fail to make sense of new meanings and references, lose their identity and habits, and find themselves in “a deeply dehumanizing environment” (Malkki, 1995). Yet, despite all these constraints, refugees often succeed in developing a sense of appropriation of the space they live in, and temporary settlements evolve into urban incubators in which refugees transform shelters and camps into authentic cities.

### Empirical Problem

By 2014, Syrian refugees had become the largest population under UNHCR’s mandate (UNHCR, 2014a). Lebanon has maintained largely open borders throughout the Syrian crisis (Thibos, 2014) and it is now home to nearly 40% of the almost 4 million Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries. It has thus become the country with the highest rate of refugees per local population worldwide. One in four people in Lebanon is a refugee (UNHCR, 2014b). The consequences on the host country are also enormous. They include social instability and tensions; exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities; inadequacy of existing infrastructure, rapid transformations on land use; aggravated unemployment; sudden demographic imbalances; radical changes to internal boundaries; and the risk of layering a second refugee population on top of the existing Palestinian refugees (UNHCR, 2014a).

Lebanon and Syria have a bilateral agreement since 1958, which gives several privileges to citizens of both countries, including freedom of stay, freedom of movement and economic cooperation. Therefore, Syrian refugees can legally work in Lebanon (Naufal, 2012). On the other hand, complex and enduring political tensions exist. Syria occupied Lebanese territories from 1976 to 2005. When Syrian tanks finally withdrew in 2005, Lebanon’s political factions fell into two camps: the pro-Syrian and the anti-Syrian (Thibos, 2014). Political divisions and security problems

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arose also in camps, increased by the fact that secret service members and Islamic fundamentalists entered the country as refugees and have benefitted from this status for several years (Naufal, 2012; UNHCR, 2015).

Despite allowing large numbers of refugees into its territory, the Lebanese government rarely permits having organized camps. Two main reasons are behind this apparently contradictory policy. First, politicians fear that temporary Syrian camps become permanent, duplicating the case of the 280,000 Palestinians that have been lining in camps since 1948 – most of them which have become self governed (UNHCR, 2014c). Second, various factions in the government, mainly the Hezbollah (a Shiite militia allied with the Syrian Regime) are concerned about the message that this permissiveness could send to the Syrian government (Naufal, 2012). This policy, and the dramatic surge in demand that no regular housing market can absorb, have provoked the emergence of various types of shelters for refugees, spread over almost 2000 locations (UNHCR, 2014c).

This paper develops a categorization of Syrian refugee shelters and camps in Lebanon. It explores the (largely unknown) mechanisms of sheltering conducted *by* and *for* refugees in two types of settlements: organized and informal. The results bring into light the variety of existing solutions, demonstrating the complexity of needs and possible interventions required. They can also help understand the stages of transformation of the built environment in temporary settlements, and stakeholders' roles and elements of power and control in the organization of camps.

### Methodology

The collection of information was carried out in January 2015, notably in the Bekaa Valley region. This region was chosen for three main reasons: First, it has the largest number of refugees in the country (see Annex 1). Second, it's the only place where a few organized camps have been authorized by the Lebanese government. Third, it's the first author's place of birth, which facilitates an in-depth understanding of social relations, networks, cultural references and meanings as well as contacts with stakeholders. Additionally to visits and observations in the Bekaa territory, two camps were studied in further detail: the informal settlement in Jdita Village and the organized (formal) camp in Bar-Elias Village. Informal group discussions with refugees were conducted as well as interviews with managers of the two camps (the *shaweesh* in the informal one and the representative of the NGOs in the other) and with leaders of local authorities. Direct observations were documented with photos, maps and drawings. Reports written by humanitarian organizations (UNHCR, UNHABITAT, etc.), and official documents produced by the Lebanese government were also analysed. Local and international press reports were used to document other types of shelters.

### Results: Types of Shelters

The UNHCR's last survey 2015 shows that 50.9% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are at risk of evictions and live in overcrowded spaces of poor quality (UNHCR, 2015). Yet, their conditions and challenges vary. In fact, a total of seven types of sheltering solutions were found in this study.

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This section describes each of them.

**1. Rented accommodations (Rooms, apartments and space built informally):** As many as 28.5% of the Lebanese population is under the poverty line. In low-income neighborhoods, infrastructure is insufficient and electricity and water are often purchased from private operators (Fawaz, Saghiyeh, & Nammour, 2014). In the absence of a comprehensive national strategy to respond to crises, 57% of refugees live in rented accommodations in these poorest areas. This means that the most vulnerable population proportionally spends the most for housing, infrastructure and services (UNHCR, 2014c) (see Annex 2). Apartments are often subdivided and rooms are added illegally. The majority of residents live at risk in structurally unsound buildings. The typical housing unit is a single room subdivided from an original apartment with a makeshift kitchen and toilet. The other common solution is a 2/3 bedroom apartment shared by two or more families. Overcrowding is therefore a major concern (Fawaz et al., 2014). Rental arrangements are often informal and are conducted verbally. A predatory relationship exists between owners and tenants and thus evictions are frequent, especially when refugees are unable to pay the rent, when there are political differences with the host community and when the refugees' presence is seen as a threat.

**2. Unfinished buildings and non-residential structures:** About 25% of refugees, who cannot afford other options, such as rent, squat in unfinished buildings and transform them into collective shelters. However, the number of buildings readily available for rehabilitation is dwindling. Worksites and unfinished structures pose the problems of informal settlements; for example, they lack proper sanitation systems, water and electricity supply (UNHCR, 2015).

**3. Informal settlements:** As affordable shelter options fade, about 15% of refugees turn to informal settlements, particularly in locations which provide proximity to agricultural work (UNHCR, 2015). In most cases, Syrian agricultural workers ask permission from landowners to bring their enlarged families. This explains why social relationships tend to be better in these semi-rural informal settlements. Shelters are produced through self-help, and materials (poles, nylon, sheets, etc.) are often provided by NGOs (see fig. 1). These tents are typically heated with fires and the floors are made of carpets on bare ground, procuring very little isolation or waterproofing. Water is dispensed into previously distributed tanks by local or international organizations, which also often install prefabricated toilets linked to basic sanitation systems. Given that locations are often semi-rural but close to populated areas and services, refugees resort to illegal connections to the electric grid. Garbage is disposed haphazardly or burned (few municipal containers are used for waste management), and the scarce infrastructure often cannot absorb additional demand.

The number of tents varies from one place to another. In some cases individual families rent part of the land, whereas in other cases the whole lot is rented by a group of refugees. Sometimes, NGOs pay the rent and community leaders then sublease the space to other refugees and thus obtain a profit. Rental agreements are often verbal and the duration of a lease can vary from a few



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days to years, making evictions too easy. Underground water and soil pollution and other environmental impacts that increasingly threaten Lebanon's food security, are largely the result of these camps (Fawaz et al., 2014).

4. Collective shelters: About 3% of refugees live in collective shelters that provide rent-free accommodation (UNHCR, 2015). They include pre-existing buildings and structures that have been rehabilitated by NGOs, such as unfinished schools, hotels, factories and offices. Many of these shelters are subject to severe overcrowding, housing at times dozens of families. Collective shelters are located in areas of high concentration of refugees especially in semi-rural regions where it is possible to find work in agriculture (Fawaz et al., 2014).

5. Hosting: It is estimated that during the first year of the Syrian crisis, 15,000 Syrian refugees were hosted by local communities, families or friends. In most cases, the refugees were accommodated free of charge. In some other cases, NGOs provided cash support to the host family. Spaces became overcrowded, and water and electricity demands have significantly increased since then.

6. Formal settlements: The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) has recently authorized the use of temporary shelters instead of tents. Three small formal settlements located in the Bekaa accommodate up to 75,000 refugees. Around 1000 temporary shelter units were erected in privately owned property. They are to be approved by the MoSA on a case-by-case basis (UNHCR, 2015). They are fenced and located far from inhabited localities. NGOs provide materials and install demountable modular shelters. The camps provide filtered water, electricity and sanitation. Special prefabricated units are used as classrooms; there are also a mini hospital, stores and a mosque. Residents suffer from inactivity, lack of recreational activities and services and unemployment. Besides, they are not allowed to leave the camp without permission of the camp manager, who is assigned by the NGO (see fig. 1).

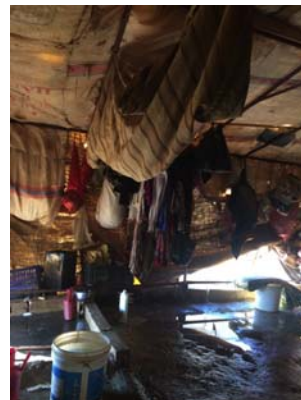


Fig. 1. Left: Formal camp Bar Elias, Bekaa. Right: Informal settlement Jdita, Bekaa.

7. Palestinian camps: It is estimate that about 44,000 Palestinian refugees who fled from Syria are living within the twelve Palestinian camps that exist in Lebanon. These camps face critical

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challenges of overcrowding, fragile housing and inadequate water and sanitation systems (UNHCR, 2015; UNRWA, 2015).

### Conclusion

This paper reviews the characteristics of seven types of shelter solutions adopted *by* (or *for*) Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Despite the attention that has been given by the media and politicians to new temporary camps (authorized or otherwise), the largest proportion of refugees lives in more “invisible conditions”, notably in rented shelters in urban regions. They are, however, slowly moving to informal settlements in rural areas. In informal camps, inhabitants are usually members of enlarged families; therefore, social ties are strong between them. Contrary to the case of organized (formal) camps, freedom of both movement and location within informal camps help them find jobs, create their own businesses, enroll children in local schools and have better relations with the local population in nearby villages. Besides, the active participation of the refugees in shelter design and construction gives them a stronger sense of belonging (Lizarralde, 2014). They make changes inside their dwellings (hanging sheets to create separations inside the tents, building shelves for kitchen tableware, etc.), enlarge their tents by adding one or more rooms, install doors and windows found in abandoned houses or construction sites, connect illegally to electricity and satellite networks, create wells and plant flowers and vegetables in front of their shelters. On the other hand, in the organized camps, social relationships between refugees are almost inexistent, notably because they usually come from random locations. Very little changes are allowed in the modular units assigned to each family. Rules of behavior are strict and management is rigorously conducted by officers. Organized camps are also far from inhabited places, something that reduces the refugees’ capacity to find jobs, access services, integrate with the local population and create productive businesses. Refugees express despair and nostalgia in both types of camps, but, in the formal camps refugees are particularly inactive, isolated and marginalized.

Demographic rapid changes, internal security, poverty, unemployment, lack of services and pollution represent serious challenges for both refugees and the host community for the years to come. This study is not finished yet. For this review to be complete, we shall now proceed to pursue the study in other sorts of shelters. Furthermore, the transformation of the built space in camps will be observed in regular intervals of time. Yet, our preliminary results already raised pertinent questions of great importance to both international scholars and Lebanese decision-makers: Despite the banning of organized Syrian refugee camps by the Lebanese government, will they become a replica of the Palestinian camps and develop into permanent and self-governed urban settings? How do power and control, as exerted by humanitarian agencies, affect the recovery and integration of refugees?

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### Authors' Biography

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Faten Kikano is a Ph.D. student affiliated to the IF Research Group at the School of Architecture of Université de Montréal. She was self-employed for 20 years as a designer and a consultant for various types of architecture and interior architecture projects. Simultaneously, she has taught design courses at the Lebanese American University (LAU), the American University of Science and Technology (AUST), and Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in Lebanon. She has a Professional Master Degree from ALBA in interior architecture. Her research is to explore the appropriation of space in self-made and in organized camps. Her research focus is more on the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon.



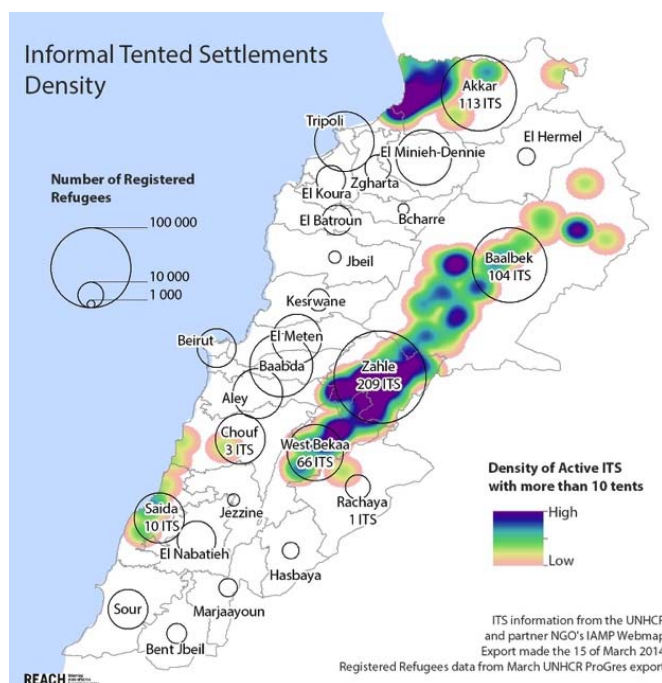
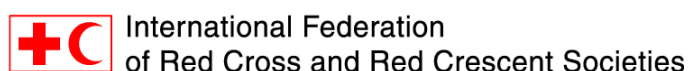
Mahmood Fayazi is a Ph.D. candidate affiliated to the IF Research Group at the School of Architecture of Université de Montréal. He has solid experience in research, implementation and management of post-disaster reconstruction projects. He was involved in important projects after several earthquakes in Iran including; Bam, 2003; Zarand, 2004; Lorestan, 2005; and Semnan, 2009. He also worked from 2008 to 2012 at the research department of the Housing Foundation Organization which is responsible for providing affordable houses for low income families and survivors after disasters. He has a Master Degree from the University of Shahid Beheshti and he has taught at Université de Montréal, and the Universities of Azad and Tehran in Iran. He also has given lectures in McGill University and Université de Montréal.



Gonzalo Lizarralde is a Professor at the School of Architecture of Université de Montréal. He has long experience in consulting for architecture and construction projects and has published important research in the fields of low-cost housing and project management. Dr. Lizarralde has taught at the University of Cape Town (South Africa); McGill University, Université de Montréal, and Universidad Javeriana (Colombia) and has given lectures in universities in Europe, USA and Latin America. Dr. Lizarralde is the director of the IF Research Group (grif) of Université de Montréal, which studies the processes related to the planning and development of construction projects. He is a founding member of i-Rec.



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### Annex 2

**Table 1: Poverty and Refugee Distribution Across Lebanon's Governorates**

Governorate	Percentage of Lebanon's Poor in Governorate (2007 data)	Percentage of Governorate's Population that is Poor (2007 data)	No. of registered S. Refugees in Governorate (as of May 2014)	Percentage of total registered S. Refugee Population in Governorate (as of May 2014)
Bekaa	13.0%	12.7%	339,539	35.9%
North	38.0%	20.7%	266,865	28.2%
Mount Lebanon	27.3%	39.9%	236,593	25.0%
South	15.6%	10.5%	77,831	8.2%
Nabatieh	4.0%	5.9%	45,818	4.8%
Beirut	2.1%	10.4%	28,575	3.0%

**Source:** Columns 1 & 2: International Poverty Centre. 2008; Column 3: UNHCR; Column 4: calculated, based on a total of 995,221 registered refugees. (Thibos, 2014)

Comparative Table: Informal Settlement and Formal Camp

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Characteristics	Informal settlement	Formal Camp
<b>SHELTER</b>		
Choice of location	Refugees rent a piece of land near inhabited locality	Land chosen and offered by NGOs
Type of shelter	Tent	Prefabricated demountable shelter
Materials for shelter	Provided by NGOs and refugees	Provided by NGOs
Shelter installation	Done by Refugees	Done by NGOs
Electricity	Illegal connections made by refugees	Provided by a private generator offered by NGOs
Water	Supplied in tanks (1 by family) Water/tanks provided by NGOs	Common tanks and water provided by NGOs
Sanitation	External cabin installed by NGO One for each family	Internal WC and toilet Installed by NGOs
Sanitation plumbing system	Very basic Soil and water pollution	Linked to the municipal sanitation system
Waste collection	Thrown in rivers, burned or in municipality containers	Done by NGOs
Heating	Bare fire Risk of burning the tent	Provided by NGOs
Exterior intervention on shelter (Sense of ownership)	Possibility of adding connecting tents to enlarge the space	Not possible
Exterior intervention near shelter	Vegetable/flowers planting, well digging, laundry hanging,	Poor and very few changes authorized by camp manager
Interior intervention on shelter: elements (1)	Smart solutions to create many small and private spaces	Space used as it is initially
Interior intervention on shelter: mood (2)	Very personal mood inside each shelter	Neutral interior space
Limits of camp	No boundaries	Built fence surrounding the camp
<b>FREEDOM</b>		
Camp authority	<i>Shaweesh</i> , a Surian refugee himself	Local manager designated by NGO
Freedom of movement	Allowed	Not allowed to leave the camp
Job	Possibility of finding a job (close to the village) or in agriculture	Not allowed
<b>SOCIAL ASPECTS</b>		
Relation to other refugees in camp (1)	Members of the same enlarged families	Same religion and same political views
Relation to other refugees in camp (2)	Very friendly but not solidary	No relations to other refugees
Relation with hosting community	Possibility of tensions (refugees exceeded nbr of inhabitants of village)	No relations
Place to pray	In the village	In the camp
School	In the village, government school in the afternoon	In the camp
Entertainment for children	Occasional by NGOs	Regular (playground in the camp)

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