

# Introduction

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## Introduction

This book explores one of the largest, most complex and intractable humanitarian emergencies today: Syria's displacement crisis (2012–present). About half of Syria's pre-war population has been displaced, and of these, about five million as refugees in fragile Middle East states, mainly in cities and urban areas. Although the numbers are uncertain and changing, there are about 3.4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 805,000 in Lebanon, 660,000 in Jordan and an additional 260,000 in Iraqi Kurdistan (UNHRC Data Portal 2023). While cities offer economic opportunities, employment and services, displacement crises often turn protracted and strain local infrastructure, service provision and host communities. These features also apply to the Syrian refugee population. Aiding large numbers of urban displaced is therefore a major challenge to humanitarian policy. Unable or unwilling to tackle the root causes of displacement, the international community is searching for better policies to address displacement in fragile host countries. This is not only a key development challenge, but an opportunity: towns and cities offer better prospects for medium-term integration and self-reliance than camp-based responses.

Cities have become major sites of displacement, but aid policies have not kept pace with this urban transformation. There are many reasons: profiling is difficult with refugees living among the urban poor, it is costly, host communities need support too and agencies lack experience with support in urban areas in general and in middle-income countries in particular. Unlike

the refugee camps built and serviced by humanitarian organizations, the urban realm is governed by national and local authorities and subject to host state policies.

The size and complexity of cities and towns are reasons that they offer the best long-term prospects for the displaced. Cities have larger and often unregulated ('informal') labour markets, more shelter options and access to health and school facilities. Cities and towns offer greater freedom of movement, foster self-reliance and offer better prospects for socio-economic integration and entrepreneurship (Harb et al. 2018). Indeed, refugees are more economically minded and entrepreneurial than is often assumed (Betts 2021). However, cities can also turn into spatial 'poverty traps', where the displaced eke out a living below subsistence levels (Bird 2019). While emigration offers a route to economic development, this is often not the case with urban residency. Moreover, the displaced compete with other urban dwellers for housing jobs and services in a way that strains host-guest relations and may cause backlash against support for refugees both on the local and national level.

The urban displaced display a range of vulnerability markers such as unemployment, debts, housing insecurity and discrimination (Jacobsen and Cardona 2014: 7). The literature offers some clues as to what is needed to succeed in an urban environment, such as having at least one family member employed and with skills that are marketable in an urban setting. This is particularly important due to the market transactions typical of urban environments and the need for cash for food and services, referred to as a 'commoditization' of urban livelihoods (Moser, in Jacobsen and Nichols 2011: 12). This means that sources of cash income from one's own labour, credit or remittances are critically important for life to remain viable. Urban residence offers more opportunities for work, but the living costs are also higher (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2017). Livelihood coping strategies involve reducing spending and buying on credit, but, over time, many displaced have depleted their savings, incurred debts and sold off productive assets. They must therefore adopt a variety of 'negative coping mechanisms' to survive such as begging, borrowing money, not sending their children to school, reducing health and food expenses or not paying rent.

Refugees are often stereotyped as passive agents in need of help. However, the evidence suggests that given the chance, refugees not only contribute to local economies but are drivers of change, revitalizing neighbourhoods and making inroads in traditional trades or complementing them. Recent research has highlighted the potential for entrepreneurship among refugees and the formation of refugee economies (Betts 2021). New studies of Syrian entrepreneurs in Beirut find that they suffer from prejudice, legal obstacles, persecution and discrimination (Harb et al. 2018). Despite several constraints, both legal and local, other studies find that the Syrian

residents have revitalized streets, transformed neighbourhoods and stimulated the local economy (Yassine and Al-Harithy 2021). Branding the Syrian refugees as entrepreneurial can also be a strategy to foreground their ability to thrive without help or support, thus representing a neoliberal refugee regime where refugees must pay their way. This can also be used to set Syrian refugees apart from other, potentially less business-oriented displaced, in an example of ethnic and racial stereotyping (Turner 2019).

Cities are not only the premier destination for refugees but also their preferred option, to the degree of either bypassing or leaving formal camps (Earle 2016). Research on urban refugees in Lebanon finds that post-displacement settlement choices are influenced by several factors such as kinship, social networks, denomination, and security considerations (Knudsen 2017). Typically, settlement processes are iterative, with families resettling consecutively before reaching their destination (World Bank 2017: 49). In many cases, the displaced converge in impoverished neighbourhoods and inner-city slums, which, as time passes, leads to a clustering of the displaced, living among the urban poor, in the vicinity of refugee camps and in squatted buildings, that has been termed urban encampment (Agier 2013). The Syrian displacement crisis has also led to new forms of urban cohabitation and homemaking, with young, unmarried men living and renting together, a solution to housing shortages for a group who are now recreating a new life in exile and earning a living from odd jobs and small business ventures (Dinger 2022a).

Over the past decades, academic research has centred on refugee camps and their genealogy, governance and security impact both on refugees and host societies (Lischer 2005; McConnachie 2016; Gatter 2023), but also on the urbanization of camps (Maqusi 2020) and the tendency for large camps to resemble proto-towns or 'camp-cities' (Agier 2002). For the Middle East region especially, key works have documented the historiography of forced displacement and relief (Chatty 2010; Watenpaugh 2015), as well as country-specific studies of Middle East refugee crises and encampment (Sassoon 2009; Hoffmann 2016; Gabiam 2016; Chatty 2018). The large and sophisticated literature on camp-based refugees in the Middle East reflects historical precedents, in particular the Palestinian encampment (Peteet 2005; Knudsen and Hanafi 2011; Achilli 2014; Schiocchet 2022). There has until recently been less research on the out-of-camp urban displaced ('non-camp refugees') although they are the largest group worldwide (Kozumi and Hoffstaedter 2015) and in the Syrian displacement crisis (UNHCR Data Portal 2023). Indeed, very little is known about the settlement choices and post-displacement outcomes for the urban displaced. Refugees are often reluctant to provide details of their economic situation. Standard survey sessions among the urban displaced suffer from a lack of trust, and thus important information is either withheld or distorted. The refugees can

also struggle to access services and amenities, and are faced with housing, schooling and employment barriers (World Bank 2016, 2017).

This introduction provides an overview of the urban displacement literature and is structured along three key themes at different scales: first, refugees self-settling in cities and arrival sites; second, an examination of host country policies and processes of refugee urbanism; and third, assessing global policy instruments and approaches that aim to meet the needs of the urban displaced. To this end, the chapters in this volume employ a range of research methods to illuminate these levels, interventions, practices and impacts, from qualitative interview-based research to urban planning interventions and studies, as well as a quantitative, multi-country survey across cities and sites in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraqi Kurdistan (URBAN3DP 2020). The mixed-methods approach reveals novel insights across this wide range of contributions. These include, among others, the interdigitated experiences of the displaced with host country citizens and other displaced persons as well as class-based interactions with other urban poor. The mixed methods used in this volume also demonstrate that trends of urbanization link with those of impoverishment of residents – both citizens and non-citizens. Furthermore, the persistent inability of policies to ‘catch up’ to the actual movements of people and support their self-settlements is a pronounced problem. Finally, the chapters in the volume also demonstrate that there are historical and global policy approaches – some of which have been successful – that now lack coherence in their implementation and ignore key lessons that could be learned.

## **Urban Displacement and Aid Interventions**

The magnitude, scale and timing of displacement depend on conflict intensity, duration and scale, as well as regime type and conflict outcomes. Displacement and migration routes, in turn, are influenced by security concerns, distance and terrain type as well as information sourced through social networks and social media (Moore and Shellman 2007). This means that we know why, when and where the forcibly displaced leave their homes, regions and countries, but much less about where they are heading once they cross international and state boundaries and what determines post-settlement outcomes. This remains a critical knowledge gap. Preliminary findings from a multi-country survey (URBAN3DP 2020) show that they move to cities and towns often consecutively in search of safety, via border towns and areas towards peri-urban centres and towns. Ease of return can also be an issue, with some settling in border areas to facilitate future return. These decisions can change over time, and there is thus a temporal dimension to secondary migration, with the displaced resettling when cir-

cumstances change or host country policies shift, as evidenced by examples from Jordan (Kvittingen et al. 2019), Turkey (Içduygu and Nimer 2019) and Lebanon (Fakhoury and Ozkul 2019).

Post-settlement studies from Lebanon, for example, show that the Syrian families are place-centred, with limited spatial mobility, social interaction and host–population interaction (Knudsen 2017). This is consistent with studies showing that cities offer anonymity and with the fact that many displaced remain unregistered and unaided (Crisp et al. 2012). Moreover, studies confirm that most of the urban displaced do not return, thus remaining in protracted displacement, exceeding the ten-year average for displaced refugees (Devictor and Do 2017). Beyond this, we know less about the processes whereby self-settled refugees make themselves at home in Middle East cities and towns. These knowledge gaps are also one of the reasons that there is a lack of effective aid policies for urban areas; indeed, the UNHCR has only recently reoriented its work away from camps and towards urban contexts (UNHCR 2014; Crisp 2017, 2021).

Current aid modalities and systems such as the UN Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) are overtaxed, underfunded and suffer from coordination problems (World Bank 2017: 126; Culbertson et al. 2016). At the same time, the many vulnerability reports on Syrian refugees show that they are getting poorer and depleting their assets, with skills underutilized due to labour-market exclusion (World Bank 2016). Despite cash and in-kind assistance to more than two-thirds of Syrian refugees, nine out of ten are food insecure, with cash expenditures declining amid rising house rents (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2017: 26). Adding to this, they often live in substandard and insecure shelters, paying exorbitant rents or facing eviction (Kirbyshire et al. 2017: 10). Moreover, social capital gets depleted, as demonstrated in Lebanon where host–guest relations have gone from a warm welcome to competition over labour, scarce public resources and services amid an overburdened infrastructure, rising unemployment and negative GDP growth (Knudsen 2017). In sum, this means that current aid systems and volumes have not prevented a slide towards poverty and destitution, with female-headed households the most vulnerable (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2017: 85, 100). To address this, the World Bank (2017) has advocated a ‘developmental approach’ to displacement with a special focus on the urban displaced (World Bank, GFDRR and GPFDR 2017).

The most widely used policy intervention targeting the urban displaced is area-based approaches (ABAs) and can be considered a key element in the shift from a humanitarian to a developmental approach. Area-based approaches have been proposed as a solution that can benefit poor urban dwellers and urban displaced alike (Parker and Maynard 2015). Moving away from traditional service delivery, area-based approaches represent a shift towards a participatory approach where humanitarian agencies engage

national and local authorities to expand services and amenities among both the urban displaced and the host population. The approach is especially relevant in high-need areas, typical of urban displacement clusters (Ruaudel and Morrison-Métois 2017).

Closely linked to this is what is known as ‘community-based assistance’ (CBA), which is a time-delimited intervention in cities whereby the lead agency (mainly the UNHCR) negotiates access to social services with host country programmes and until these are put in place, and establishes supplemental services to refugees, organizes mobile registration services for refugees and offers training and technical assistance (Ward 2014). One of the limitations of this approach is its limited duration, along with the risk of services becoming unavailable due to lack of funding, access or both. This has prompted a shift from short-term to medium-term interventions, as well as a transition from camps to urban areas, and from humanitarian aid to development and resilience (Culbertson et al. 2016). The massive Refugee Response and Resilience Plan (3RP) for the Syrian refugee crisis attempted to combine a humanitarian response with host country development considerations, using the term ‘resilience’ to blend the two approaches (Anholt and Sinatti 2019; Gatter 2021).

New approaches to aiding refugees also include unconditional cash transfers, which are a cost-effective solution, with results equal to or better than traditional programmes run by NGOs, and are especially relevant in urban areas where injecting cash transfers helps revive local economies, but can also heighten community tensions (Crisp 2021). Closely linked to this are new funding modalities, which move away from project funding and instead channel money through government ministries to capacitate state institutions (Buscher 2018: 10) and cooperate with public and private partners, as well as community-based organizations (CBOs).

The prioritization of the state is also integral to area-based approaches and relevant for finding new ways to alleviate housing shortages among refugees. This was demonstrated in Lebanon’s Occupancy Free of Charge (OFC) facility, which provided affordable housing in buildings that met minimal living standards for a time-limited period (AUB and Save the Children 2020: 7). While the OFC schemes and fee waivers have enabled beneficiaries to shed some of their old debts, they are accumulating new ones and are caught in a debt cycle. This means that the refugee households’ economies are mediated through managing debts rather than money.

## **Settling in Cities**

Managing mass displacement and settlement in urban areas is a major development issue, relevant to both bilateral and multilateral efforts to aid those displaced in fragile middle-income countries (Betts and Collier 2017).

An 'urban refugee' is neither a recognized legal term nor a definite category. Rather it is used as a shorthand for refugees settling in cities and urban areas. As a generic term, 'urban refugees' can encompass different refugee groups, and it often focuses on the impact of their displacement on the infrastructure and growth of cities and towns. At present, almost two-thirds of the world's refugees live in urban areas, compared to 35 per cent in the 1950s. The academic focus on urban refugees began in Africa in the 1980s (Kibreab 2007). After an initial reluctance to acknowledge the scale and relevance of urban displacement, new urban crises pushed the UNHCR to formulate a policy on alternatives to camps (UNHCR 2014). Although camps have re-emerged in response to Middle East displacement crises, the large majority of refugees are self-settling in cities and towns. The focus on urban refugees increased after the Iraq War, with Iraqi refugees settling in cities like Damascus, Amman and Cairo (Chatty and Mansour 2012; Hoffmann 2016; Twigt 2022).

Current aggregate data on urban refugees is insufficient and unreliable (World Bank 2017: 29), reflecting a range of methodological challenges (Jacobsen and Nichols 2011). Cities and towns are neither equally affected nor equipped to manage displacement, and thus can be placed along a gradient of displacement impact and fragility (World Bank, GFDRR and GPF 2017). Available research indicates that the poorest segments of the displaced end up in smaller and medium-sized towns, because capital cities are either too expensive or inaccessible (IDMC 2018: 6). In addition, cities and towns are differently affected by displacement and vary in their capacity to handle the population influx.

Refugees and migrants typically settle in informal areas because of the greater availability and affordability of housing in poor and underserved areas (Fawaz 2017). Middle Eastern cities, in particular the largest ones, often have large informal areas and slums, which is one reason that refugees have settled among the urban poor in capital and cosmopolitan cities such as Istanbul, Beirut and Amman. The poorest refugees have mostly, but not exclusively, settled in urban poverty zones and cores, informal areas and slums. A 'slum' can be defined as a poor and densely settled area where the residents lack proper water, sanitation and electricity supply (Gilbert 2007). In informal areas property rights and land tenure are typically either blurred or contested (UNDP 2018). Both informal areas and slums are imprecise terms that are not consistently applied, but they typically have building morphologies that are small, dense and irregular (Taubenböck et al. 2018).

In Lebanon, refugee camps established since the 1920s have served as nuclei for informal settlements (Fawaz and Peillen 2003). In this way, the once remote camps were overtaken by urban sprawl to become mixed neighbourhoods (Dorai 2011). Urbanizing city camps, over the course of time, transformed into popular neighbourhoods and coalesced as extended

and visually undifferentiated campscapes (Martin 2015). An example of this is Sabra, one of Beirut's largest informal areas, with the tiny Shatila refugee camp at its centre (Allan 2014).

When refugees settle among the urban poor, they burden the existing infrastructure and increase the pressure on understaffed and overtaxed health facilities, schools and transportation systems. Despite the lack of proper infrastructure and facilities, the lower rents and greater availability of shelters in informal areas make them an attractive destination for urban refugees settling in dense and overcrowded neighbourhoods, thus recreating camp-like structures in an urban setting, which has been referred to as 'urban encampment' (Agier 2013; Fawaz 2017). Informal areas are populated by residents who lack political clout, which – at least in part – explains why public services have not been extended to these areas in the first place. Another reason is that the residents often do not pay taxes, nor in most cases utility bills, with losses incurred by providers (Verdeil 2016).

Due to the lack of affordable housing, some of the urban displaced resort to squatting in abandoned and unfinished buildings (Al-Harithy et al. 2021). Squatting can, in this context, be defined as living in, or using, a dwelling (or land) without the consent of the owner for a longer period, usually a year or more (Vasudevan 2015). Unlike renting, squatting is a precarious existence associated with the threat of eviction or arrest and typically involves lacking basic amenities – water, sanitation and electricity – and is correlated with lower income and education levels (UNDP 2018). Squatting comes in many forms, including squatting in camps (Sanyal 2011), whereby refugees expand living quarters and improve homes in contravention of regulations limiting both the size and type of buildings allowed (Sanyal 2014: 567).

The informal areas, slums and shanty towns found in cities around the world are the first point of arrival for rural-to-urban migrants, labourers and refugees, and thus have been labelled 'arrival cities' (Saunders 2011: 18–20), but may more aptly be termed 'arrival sites'. Arrival cities provide refugees and migrants with a foothold in the city and can support socio-economic integration, self-sufficiency and, for some, upward social mobility. Examples include the *gecekondu* in Turkey, which are simple houses set up overnight on a vacant piece of land without building permissions. Yet after years of conflict, they were legalized to become valuable urban quarters. The *gecekondu* example not only illustrates why arrival cities are important as a housing solution for refugees and migrants, but also their role in changing and legitimating cities as new repositories for the urban displaced (Fawaz 2009, 2013).

Taking arrival cities as their point of departure, Robert Forster and Are John Knudsen compare settlement choices and outcomes for Syrian refugees living in the poorest neighbourhoods in Beirut, Tripoli and Tyre. The latter two are secondary cities trailing the capital and suffer from economic

divisions and rampant inequality. The three cities have large refugee populations, both Palestinian and, since 2012, Syrian. The chapter demonstrates that Syrian refugees' settlement choices and pathways are influenced by kinship networks, affordable housing and employment opportunities. The cities' resources to provide for refugees differ: Tripoli is the country's poorest city, with Syrian refugees concentrated in the residential extensions around the run-down urban core. In Beirut, the Sabra area is a refugee and poverty agglomeration where city and camp merge and refugees, migrants and the urban poor cohabit. In Tyre, the Syrian refugees have settled in the urban core, informal settlements and Palestinian refugee camps, making the two groups intersect while remaining socially distinct.

Family and kinship dynamics in mobility considerations and decisions in the Middle East are complex and have been a long-standing subject in Middle Eastern scholarship (Tobin et al. 2021). Recent research on displaced Syrians in Jordan has expanded this line of inquiry, emphasizing the long history of circular and seasonal migration between Syria and Jordan and its relationship to family and kinship connections. Historically, many Syrian men left for seasonal labour migration to the Middle East and the Gulf countries, which left female spouses as the *de facto* heads of households, managing the economic affairs, raising children and calling in support as needed (Wagner 2019; Lokot 2018). Once the Syrian crisis began, those economic ties substantially influenced family migration decision-making, as well as contributing to new social networks to sustain Syrian refugee livelihoods in displacement (Stevens 2016). The processes of rebuilding social capital in displacement are not always predictable, easy to discern or straightforward, however, as they are crosscut by class, gender and generations (Lokot 2020).

In her chapter from Jordan's urban north, Sarah A. Tobin examines the role of family networks among women in Mafraq, a major destination for Syrian refugees from Homs, Syria, which is 300 km away. Many Syrian refugees in Mafraq migrated this lengthy journey because of previous labour migration patterns. There, these Syrian women rely upon local networks to source information about humanitarian aid, which is insufficient. Lacking employment options and the ability to source sufficient humanitarian aid, Syrian women turn to remittances from their transnational networks. This chapter examines the ways that Syrian women have cultivated a 'nested' networking system for economic viability in an otherwise economically challenging environment. Syrian women are thus embedded in diverse and dynamic connections that shift in geographic reach, utility and outcomes, as they crosscut gender, are impacted by scarcity and change over time.

Forced migration research has shown that people tend to follow in the footsteps of those fleeing or migrating before them, something that is known as 'path dependency'. This means that people flee to destinations they have previous knowledge of, may have visited or where people have gone before

them, often also with a local or national presence as a migrant and diaspora community (Moore and Shellman 2006, 2007). This is the case in Lebanon, a long-time destination for Syrian labour migrants, eased by bilateral treaties, short distance, porous borders and language and cultural similarities, with migrants taking advantage of the country's open economy (Knudsen 2017). For similar reasons, Jordan was a destination for Syrians displaced from the south of the country due to proximity to the border, migrant labour ties and cross-border trade, as well as sociocultural similarities. In the case of Turkey, the country's proximity to major rebel cities such as Aleppo was a major reason for the cross-border flight to Turkey's border cities such as Gaziantep and Diyarbakir, as well as its status as a transit country for onward migration to Europe. Much fewer fled in the direction of Iraq, a war-torn country that since its break-up following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime has strained under multiple displacement and governance crises (Hoffmann 2016).

Despite a general trend towards urban self-settlement, there has been a dearth of knowledge that can predict how and why destinations are selected or reached and their socio-economic outcomes. In their chapter Khogir Wirya, Fuad Smail and Tine Gade examine the fate of ethnic Syrian Kurds displaced as refugees to Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region (KRI). About 40 per cent of the Kurdish refugees have settled in Erbil, while the rest live in camps. Despite sharing ethnic identities, those displaced are treated as Syrians (*Suriyakan*), rather than fellow Kurds, which has alienated them from the host population and disconnected them from international organizations offering support. Living in communal enclaves, their Kurdish identity has not enabled meaningful integration with fellow Kurds in Erbil. Moreover, the experience of displacement and the lack of legal protection have created distinctive vulnerabilities among the Syrian Kurdish refugees and hampered their socio-economic integration.

Turkey has traditionally been a transit country for refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq (Woods 2016). The Syrian refugees who are settling in Turkey have seen their migration aspirations tempered by the country's context. Contrary to the official state welcome of migrants as 'guests' and 'religious brothers', popular support for Syrian integration is extremely low in local communities in Turkey (Rottmann and Kaya 2020). Nonetheless, Syrian refugees in Turkey are increasingly unwilling to move to Europe despite the significant legal obstacles, hostility and discrimination they face in Turkey. As time passes by, the Syrian refugees have become emotionally attached to their new homeland to the degree that many are not only making Turkey their home, but also feel at home in the country. In this way a transit country has become a host country not only due to migration barriers, but also to cultural intimacy and the social protection stemming from living in a Muslim society. Wirya et al.'s study indicate that the 'transit country' cat-

egory label is simplistic, masking the fact that for many Syrians, Turkey has become a host country.

This serves as a backdrop to the chapter by Rebecca Bryant and Dunya Habash, examining how young Syrians have adapted to settling in cosmopolitan Istanbul, a major host city with more than half a million Syrian refugees. Examining the relationship between urban and national belonging, displaced Syrian youth have begun to view Turkey's cities as spaces of vernacular cosmopolitan aspirations. The chapter demonstrates that exile is transformative and challenges the perception of Turkey as a country that most Syrians want to leave, despite the growing xenophobia. While young Syrians have carved out a place for themselves in cosmopolitan Istanbul, they seek futures where their mobility is unconstrained both within and outside a country that in many ways continues to disenfranchise them.

## Refugee Urbanism and Country Policies

In the popular imagination, most of Syria's refugees live in camps, while in fact nearly all (95 per cent) of the displaced live outside camps (UNHCR Data Portal 2023). The combined rural-to-urban migration, population growth and displacement in the Middle East region place great strain on many cities' challenged infrastructure, already struggling under the lack of resources, governance failures and conflict (World Bank, GFDRR and GPDF 2017). Hosting non-citizens can strengthen underlying tensions and xenophobia and is one reason that refugees suffer from social isolation and labour market exclusion in some Middle East host states. Except for Turkey, the Middle East host countries are non-signatories to the international refugee convention (Janmyr 2017), which has left refugees to de facto integration without civil rights.

Settling in the city is often synonymous with renting, mainly from landlords or proprietors. On the countryside, rentals are often controlled by a local manager (*shawweesh*). Lebanon's non-camp policy (or 'policy of no-policy') has created rural and urban refugee clusters where Syrian refugees suffer from exploitative rents and unlawful evictions (Kikano et al. 2021: 441). Self-settled Syrians in Beirut's informal areas displace the poor Lebanese who, dispossessed in their own neighbourhoods, resent their Syrian neighbours. The Syrian refugees on their part feel unsafe and suffer from harassment and abuse, which are conditions replicated in other high-density refugee communities. These findings concur with the growing resentment over the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon (Knudsen 2017).

The run-down buildings and dwellings in informal areas are subject to minor and ineffectual upgrading, a patchwork of minor repairs and quick fixes that neither solves structural nor systemic deficiencies. They are un-

able to address the root problems stemming from lacking civil and property rights, which are both key elements of urban informality. To make room for new entrants, new floors and rooms are added in contravention of building codes and zoning regulations (Fawaz 2016, 2017). Incremental housing becomes a key strategy for increasing the size of living quarters and rental space as capital, opportunities and bypassing regulations permit. This is also a reminder that refugees are not only city dwellers but also city builders who shape the urban environment (Sanyal 2014). Syrian refugees thus represent a new market for local entrepreneurs who take advantage of new zoning and building regulations to build poorly constructed flats and compounds aimed at Lebanese buyers. With time, the Lebanese owners have become outnumbered by Syrian tenants, compelling them to leave and become absentee landlords (Fawaz et al. 2022).

In Lebanon, the poorest Syrian refugees typically settle in informal areas, including in and adjacent to Palestinian refugee camps (Knudsen 2018). This has reconfigured refugee camps and increases urban densification, as detailed by Ismae'l Sheikh Hassan's chapter from north Lebanon. The new high-rise buildings that are constructed in Beddawi, a Palestinian refugee camp in Tripoli, represent a new building typology used to accommodate the growing number of Syrian refugees. Financed and built by local and non-local entrepreneurs, the multistorey buildings reflect socio-economic and demographic changes in the camp and beyond in recent years. The Palestinian residents have changed their priorities too, with some selling their single-storey houses and flats to commercial developers, while others are being forced to sell for familial and economic reasons. The Beddawi case is indicative of more general changes to camps being drawn into commercially driven urbanization processes that turn them into 'city camps' and cause tensions between Syrians and the Palestinians who are forced to sell and leave.

Access to affordable housing is one of the most important policy issues for refugees displaced in urban areas. Cities, especially capital cities, are typically costly to live in, which is one reason that poor migrants and refugees tend to settle in informal areas where housing and rentals are more affordable. Affordable housing can involve the provision of housing subsidies as rental support from UNHCR, NGOs and charities. Studies from Beirut's Sabra area, however, indicate that rental subsidies are captured by slum landlords asking higher than average rents for substandard flats (Knudsen 2023). The lack of affordable housing has made refugees settle in run-down buildings, many not suited for human habitation, where marginalized tenants depend on food vouchers to survive.

The physical difference between cities and camps is one of degree, with some camps, such as Jordan's mega-camp Zaatari, rivalling cities in their size, complexity and infrastructure (Dalal 2015). Refugee camps provide

shelter, access to health and schooling facilities that, although often inadequate and underfunded, offer protection against destitution, which self-settlement in cities does not. Leaving camps often means abandoning the right to claim support and becoming dependent on one's own income and resources to cover expenses. An important policy question is whether residence in camp or out-of-camp provides better socio-economic outcomes in the long run, especially for the poorest and least connected refugees. While recent research has highlighted the advantage of out-of-camp living for long-term integration and livelihoods, refugee camps can protect against destitution, but at the expense of personal freedoms (Tobin et al. 2021). Turkey's twenty-five refugee camps are well run, equipped and managed (Woods 2016), but now only cater for a tiny minority of the Syrians in the country (UNHCR Data Portal 2023). Studies from urban settlements in Diyarbakir, a major refugee hosting city (Veul 2015), show that the Syrian refugees hold deeply negative views of camps and have found shelters and rentals through local ethnic and religious networks.

Unlike Jordan and Turkey (Chatty 2017), Lebanon did not set up formal camps to house refugees from Syria, seeing camps as a prelude to later settlement. The no-camp approach led to self-settlement of refugees in several thousand sites across the country (Knudsen 2017). The 'no-camp policy' came on the heels of more than two years of negotiations between the Lebanese government, international organizations and the UNHCR, with Lebanon rejecting setting up camps and prefabricated homes for refugees (Fawaz 2017). While Lebanon's non-camp approach was meant literally, informal tented settlements (ITSS) were set up in the Bekaa valley, one of four new 'shelter' categories established in response to the Syrian displacement crisis (UNHCR 2012). The country's non-camp approach is more strategic and complex than is alluded to here (Nassar and Stel 2019) and shifted the responsibility for aiding refugees to underfunded and overtaxed municipalities (Mourad 2017), some hostile to, or unwilling to host, refugees (Sanyal 2017). Lebanon also changed from a mere recipient of aid to capitalizing on the crisis (Geha and Talhouk 2018). The country benefits from an estimated USD 36 million that refugees pay in rent to Lebanese property owners every month, boosting the local economy through income from renting out private houses, rooms and land to refugees (UN-Habitat and UNHCR 2014). The governance crisis, economic collapse and COVID-19 pandemic sharply increased poverty in Lebanon, with nine out of ten Syrian refugees living in extreme poverty (UNHCR-Lebanon 2020).

More than 80 per cent of Syrians in Lebanon are settled in private apartments, with smaller numbers living in substandard shelters such as garages, worksites and unfinished buildings (Boustani et al. 2016). Detailed studies of tenement buildings find that land tenure is unclear, undocumented or contested, and refugees, migrants and the urban poor live next to each other in

overcrowded and substandard flats (Knudsen 2019). The number of urban refugees living in squalid shelters has increased over the past decade, affecting their health, legal protection and economic status. In order to help the Syrian refugees find affordable shelter, humanitarian agencies have sought to improve shelter conditions and standards, increase tenure security and strengthen social relations between the refugees and host communities.

The Occupancy Free of Charge (OFC) facility aims to provide affordable housing especially for the poorest refugees by covering their rental expenses (AUB and Save the Children 2020). In Lebanon, NGOs like the Norwegian Refugee Council have pioneered the OFC approach and entered rental and refurbishing deals with proprietors and owners for a time-limited period, an approach marketed as a win-win solution for both landlords and tenants. The main problem with the OFC approach is that it is costly and thus unsustainable, with NGOs unable to afford the support for longer periods of time. Moreover, when the rental period ends, longer-term hosting solutions may still be unavailable or out of reach, making the residents unwilling or unable to move, which can renew conflict between owners and proprietors. Studies of the OFC facility in Lebanon's Bekaa valley (Boano et al. 2021) show that the scheme has provided a windfall to local landowners, who combine profits from renting land with income from renting houses that are upgraded by the OFC facility (Kikano et al. 2021). State absenteeism has increased the leverage of local landowners and Syrian managers (*sharweesh*), who exploit the refugees' precarious situation.

The OFC approach is analysed in the chapter by Watfa Najdi, Mona Fawaz and Nasser Yassin, which finds that a large majority of the beneficiaries in Lebanon's Bekaa valley have benefited from the rental support and improved housing standards and livelihoods. However, several issues give grounds for concern. Market exchanges rest mostly on ad hoc agreements between tenants and landlords, and persistent tenure insecurity is related to the inability to pay rent. Only a tiny fraction of the beneficiaries has signed written lease contracts and most lack reliable information about market conditions and rents. This allows landlords to take advantage of the beneficiaries, with about one-third living under the threat of eviction. Alas, money saved through the rent ('fee') waiver is spent on pressing food and nutrition needs, rather than on longer-term human capital investments such as education. The short twelve-month duration of lease contracts adds to the families' challenges, although some are aided by benevolent landlords. The analysis shows that the OFC scheme can act as a temporary relief but is unable to resolve the longer-term housing and livelihood issues.

Like in Lebanon, many of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are found clustered in poor urban areas and neighbourhoods. In the capital Ankara (Ermann 2017), Syrian refugees have moved into dilapidated and abandoned houses due to the low rents, available employment and support from local

NGOs. Similar problems are found in Istanbul, which hosts the largest population of refugees in Turkey, with about three to five hundred thousand Syrians residing in the city. There is no state support for urban refugees in Turkey, and many pay high rents and work for low wages in unskilled professions. The refugees struggle with discrimination, barriers to accessing banking, health and education services, and poor housing and employment conditions (Woods 2016). Many of the Syrians do not identify as refugees, even rejecting the label, seeing their plight as a human rights issue, with urban (non-camp) refugees lacking both documentation and legal protection. The handful of Turkish NGOs assisting urban refugees have been slow to reorient their approach from a camp-based to an urban response.

The role of Turkey as a host country is examined by Ahmet İçduygu and Souad Osseiran, who provide a historical overview of the country's policies vis-à-vis urban refugees during the past ten years. They analyse the shift towards normalizing the urban refugee presence and the implications for state, local-level and non-governmental actors. The chapter interrogates urban self-settlement of refugees and finds that outcomes are a result of both deliberate policies and spontaneous realities. About half a million Syrian refugees live in Istanbul, having self-settled in districts based on their connections, affordable rents and economic opportunities. Turkey's policy response demonstrates that interventions in urban settings for refugees concerning health, education and social security are possible. Turkey has made three hundred thousand citizenships available to Syrian refugees, signalling a shift towards accepting their long-term presence. However, since 2016 the government has instituted different measures to contain refugee movement within Turkey and relocate refugees to the area of their first registration. Since 2019, negative public opinion vis-à-vis refugees has increased the importance of facilitating their return, including by establishing a 'safe zone' in northern Syria. This is yet another example of how refugee policies in Turkey emerge as a response to public debates and popular sentiments about the Syrian refugee presence.

In Jordan's sprawling capital Amman, about one-third of the country's 650,000 Syrian refugees have settled in low-income areas, with the remainder in camps and cities in the north, especially Irbid and Mafraq (Tobin et al. 2021). In East Amman's Jubilee neighbourhood, the Jordanians have moved out and Syrian refugees moved in, along with migrants from Egypt, Iraq and Yemen (Al-Tal and Ghanem 2019). The area is marked by urban decay, lack of services and problems with waste collection and electricity provision. Most of the Syrian refugees' hail from the southern cities such as Deraa, but some hail from Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. East Amman therefore shares many similarities with Beirut, where Syrian refugees have settled in informal areas alongside other urban poor, refugees and migrants. Jordan has eased legal access to labour markets for refugees with regional

compacts and special economic zones (SEZs) targeting Syrian labour. However, the uptake has not been nearly as high as policymakers had envisioned (Lenner and Turner 2019; Betts and Collier 2017).

As shown by Kamel Dorai's analysis of Jordan's asylum policies, the country's urban geography has been profoundly transformed by the long-term settlement of forced migrants. The Palestinian refugee experience largely determines the way Jordanian authorities plan and implement policies related to the arrival of new refugee groups. Since 2012, Jordan has established several refugee camps near the Syrian border, in part to give visibility to the Syrian refugee crisis and attract funding from the international community. Zaatari, Jordan's largest camp, has been transformed from a humanitarian space to an urbanizing proto-city with a myriad of small businesses and economic activities. However, most of the country's refugees have self-settled in cities and urban areas where employment opportunities are better. In Amman, new Syrian neighbourhoods have formed around the Palestinian refugee camps that are now an integral part of the capital's hosting core. The impact of forced migrants on the urban fabric can thus be understood through a double dynamic: the settlement of refugees in urban areas and the ongoing urbanization of Jordan's refugee camps.

## Global Policy Approaches

Syria is currently engulfed by war amid a catastrophic internal displacement and refugee crisis, but the country has historically been an important host country since Ottoman times (Chatty 2018: 2023). The interventionist wars in Iraq (2003–9) led to massive internal displacement and refugee crises, with about two million Iraqis fleeing as urban refugees to Amman, Aleppo and Damascus. The Iraqi refugee crisis forced the international aid community to rethink its strategies and recognize that refugees in the region prefer to self-settle in urban areas, with many relying on social, economic and kin networks.

As described by Dawn Chatty, Syria has been a long-term host to refugees from neighbouring countries dating back to the late Ottoman period, when Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) integrated hundreds of thousands of forced migrants from the borderlands of the Ottoman and Imperial Russian empires. This reception policy was extended in the twenty-first century to the about 1.5 million Iraqi refugees fleeing interventionist wars and settling in Damascus. The Syrian government resisted calls from the UNHCR to set up camps for the refugees and prioritized 'duty' over 'rights' as defined by the international aid regime, extending the country's historical hospitality traditions to support and integrate displaced Iraqis. As shown in Chatty's chapter, pre-conflict Syria provides a historical precedent for the urban residence in

the country's hosting of Iraqi refugees. However, the Syrian example was, until recently, taken up neither by the UNHCR nor the host countries in the region (Betts and Collier 2017).

Internationally, there have been attempts to find global solutions to the growing displacement problem, especially after the EU's erratic, ad hoc response to the Mediterranean refugee influx in 2015–16. This led to a call for greater international cooperation and commitment in responding to mass displacement (Loescher 2021: 61). In 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which aimed to strengthen mechanisms to protect people on the move. The declaration was accompanied by the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), promoting stronger support for refugees and the countries that host them (*ibid.*). The New York Declaration paved the way for the adoption of two new global compacts in 2018: the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and a Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). An important element of the GCR is that refugees should be included in the host communities from the very beginning and refugee camps reserved for emergencies only. The GCR is an intergovernmental agreement that is not binding for the signatories, and thus could have limited significance for the countries' asylum practices and policies.

The role of changing refugee policies, especially urban refugee policies, is examined by Jeff Crisp, who analyses the way in which the Syrian displacement crisis put the refugee issue at the very top of the global policy agenda, a process that culminated in the establishment of the above-mentioned GCR, a non-binding treaty that lacks specific targets or measurable objectives and so far has had modest results. Crisp shows how the Syrian emergency encouraged the international community to pursue new strategies in relation to the settlement of refugees in urban areas and outside of camps, and to adopt a long-term and developmental approach to the refugee issue, in place of the usual short-term and relief-oriented interventions. However, despite pioneering the use of cash transfers, policies and new labour schemes targeting urban refugees, the developmental approach to refugees has so far failed to take off. Looking into the future, it seems likely that most Syrian refugees will remain within the region, many of them living in urban areas and alongside host populations, surviving on the assistance they receive from humanitarian organizations, coupled with whatever livelihoods opportunities they are able to find.

Even though urban refugees are now the majority among the world's refugees, policies have not kept pace with this development. It was not until 2014 that the UNHCR formulated a new strategy on 'alternatives to camps' (UNHCR 2014). However, the UNHCR's new policy does not adequately address the challenges facing urban refugees. On the contrary, critics argue that it has given rise to a new form of internment of refugees trapped in an

eternal temporary state (Ward 2014: 93). The UNHCR is often either the only or the major service provider and is therefore perceived and treated by governments as a state-like actor. For many host countries, camps remain important, because they make refugees visible and 'legible' (Turner 2015), and therefore serve to attract humanitarian aid to the degree that host countries become refugee rentier states (Tsourapas 2019).

The changing nature of the UNHCR's policy is examined by Astri Suhrke. She argues that operating in a charged political environment, and hamstrung by limited financial autonomy, the UNHCR has developed a distinct organizational culture that blends strategic caution with tactical innovation. The refugee regime is state-centric, with key decisions regarding protection and assistance of refugees made by national governments. The UNHCR can plead and prod, but the final decision lies with the states. This leads to structural fragmentation. Second, the regime is normatively diverse and national governments develop policies in relation to their own interests. In 2002, the UNHCR initiated a shift towards a development-oriented refugee policy and introduced a scheme for greater responsibility-sharing, including more resettlement to third countries, labelled 'Convention Plus'. However, host countries still feared that programmes would enable refugees to remain indefinitely. This made the Convention Plus initiative fizzle out, while the New York Declaration and, later, the GCR were unanimously approved by the UN General Assembly. The GCR is committed to burden-sharing, but geographic proximity to conflict has remained the primary distributive mechanism and responsibility-sharing has consequently focused on the sharing of monetary costs, rather than giving refugees greater options to resettle in third countries.

Closely linked to the UNCHR's urban policies are humanitarian and urban crisis responses targeting the urban displaced. To address them, international organizations began developing unified tools, approaches and mechanisms that would ensure adequate, timely and at-scale responses in cities. Several of these global approaches and tools were tested, or partially initiated, in the response to urban emergencies in the MENA region, most of them geographically targeted and referred to under the umbrella term 'area-based approaches'. In their chapter, Ida Lien and Synne Bergby examine the evolution of global approaches and mechanisms for urban crisis response and investigate their application in the Lebanese context. Several of the global approaches and tools were partially initiated and tested in the response to the Syrian refugee crisis in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis has unfolded in urban centres characterized by socio-economic vulnerabilities and inequalities and inherited governance problems. The analysis of urban crisis responses points to competing frameworks, models and plans that have often been partially implemented and funded by a proliferation of different actors. In many cases, agencies collect their own data and carry

out their own assessments in the same area, leading to duplication of work. This also undercuts the application of area-based approaches as it can lead to competing or dissimilar plans for the same area. The so-called ‘cluster approach’ that divides interventions into clearly defined sectors to avoid duplication has also been difficult to adapt to cities. Overall, urban crisis responses remain fragmented and underfunded, reflecting the funding deficit globally and the high costs of interventions in middle-income countries such as those in the Middle East.

## **Conclusion: A Right to the City?**

As the book’s chapters outline, the pervasive urban settlement of Syrians in the Middle East has historical precedent and has carved out important patterns in the region’s urbanization. Regional tensions between policies of encampment and self-settling in urban areas have resulted in a wide variety of approaches by the UNHCR and national and local governments to intervene for the sake of the refugee and the host country alike, especially in urban contexts. However, outcomes are uneven, vary across national borders and are subject to the political economy of donor policies and practice (Dinger 2022b). Furthermore, such interventions are crosscut by gender and family, economic linkages and ethnic and linguistic cleavages. Ultimately, the volume underscores that the decade-long Syrian crisis has implications that go beyond numbers of movements of people, and into the ways in which places are shaped and formed, the ways that policies and so-called ‘solutions’ are devised and implemented, and the everyday efforts that Syrians themselves put into making it work in their new urban environs.

The widespread poverty documented by the annual Syrian vulnerability surveys over the past decade underscores that urban residence is not a panacea for the livelihood challenges facing urban refugees: large segments are mired in poverty amid shrinking aid budgets. In the Syrian crisis, long since turned protracted, the refugees remain dependent on humanitarian aid, yet the 3RP call launched in 2015 as the UN’s largest call is also one of the most underfunded. The humanitarian aid is part of broader policies of refugee governance in the Middle East (Carpi 2023), with secondary migration towards Europe marked by ambivalence (Tyldum 2021) and curbed by a range of measures, agreements and ‘compacts’ that contain refugees in sending, transit and host states (Knudsen and Berg 2023). This has made Middle East states long-term hosts for millions of refugees, paradoxically, as they, except for Turkey, are non-signatories to the refugee convention yet have become the new ‘landscapes of protection’ (Cole 2021). With most refugees unable or unwilling to return to Syria, and resettlement at an all-time low, supporting the many urban displaced necessitates a new approach, one

based on an understanding of the special challenges of urban displacement and resettlement. This volume has highlighted the challenges and vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect the poorest refugees from Syria settled in urban areas. They have moved to cities but have yet been unable to claim their ‘right to the city’, which is why a rights-based developmental rather than a long-term humanitarian approach is needed to end the decade-long ‘urban displacement crisis’. Combining local, national and global policy instruments that legalize residence, formalize employment and safeguard housing would be a first step in realizing Lefebvre’s urban vision.

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