# Governing Movement in Displacement: The Case of North Jordan

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The landscape and demographics of northern Jordan have undergone immense change since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. Mafraq and Irbid, two large cities in the north, have been overwhelmed by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), aid workers and refugees. Zaatari camp, created in 2012, currently hosts 80,000 Syrian refugees, and is located 34 kilometers from the Nassib-Jaber international border (UNHCR 2020). A kilometer away from the camp is Zaatari village, which now hosts an equal number of Syrians as it had Jordanians before the crisis (AFCI 2019). Despite this and its proximity to refugee hotspots, the small community has received relatively little attention from INGOs. The Syrians living in the village make up just some of the 79 percent of refugees in Jordan living outside of formal camps (AFCI 2019). This chapter argues that, within the context of conflict-induced mass displacement, refugee-hosting spaces – for instance, rural non-camp settlements – are not constituted by the state, the border-crossing or international humanitarianism alone. Despite the movements of refugees and forced migrants being continuously stifled and obfuscated, these sites are further enacted by the movements of refugees, connecting regional social histories, economic patterns and the decision-making strategies that constitute lives within protracted displacement.

I conceptualize movement as a form of creative communication deeply embedded in socio-historical links and relations. Movement is both an individual and a collective pursuit. Taken as a practice, it connects temporal roots and lineages, but is also explicitly bound to wider geopolitical and economic forms of power. By conceptualizing understandings of movement and its enduring implications as deeply tied to the local histories and spaces it inhabits, I propose an analysis of movement to understand how it is articulated and experienced in the present context of mass displacement. By prioritizing notions of movement based within a local, historical context, it provides a counterpoint to looking at displacement and displacement governance that starts with and centres those most affected.

I argue that a politics of movement is constructed as distinct from a politics of governance, which is traced to particular forms of power as related to the state, the international border system and humanitarian governance. This viewpoint therefore focuses on what people do, rather than the (post)colonial borders or international humanitarian spaces built and maintained to control movement. Migrant spaces do not exist independently as spaces, but rather are enacted by the migrants embedded within them. For example, an international border works and is recognised by the mechanisms that make it a border – the requirement of a passport or visa, the checking of individuals or vehicles or the ability to close and stifle movement. However, they are enacted as borders only when one tries to cross them, putting in motion these requirements. Refugee camps work under similar logics. Within the Middle East and North Africa, only 9.6 percent of refugees live in camps (UN Global Report 2018), and therefore to study displacement within these narrow parameters, rather than starting with migrant movement itself, which co-creates and co-constitutes these sites, is to overlook vital trends in migration.

This chapter seeks to show how the movement of refugees works in tandem with wider governance polices to simultaneously constitute spaces and situations, facilitating new possibilities and opportunities for how we study

protracted displacement. I evoke the concept of movement as creative communication as a methodological exploration to analyze protracted displacement outside of the usual prisms of investigation: security, political economy or international politics and humanitarianism. Traditionally, in the study of forced migration, the sites through which migrants move – the border, the camp, the detention center or settlement – are constituted solely by the wider political, legal or geographical dynamics that work to control movement and define the migrant in specific ways. Such framing positions the migrant as an object to be governed, removing the autonomy of each migrant and their ability to co-constitute the situations or spaces within these wider dynamics. This conceptualization does not ignore state or humanitarian policies of refugee governance, but rather reveals the potential for understanding the alternative strategies and articulations used by migrants' movement to constitute their own situation while being deeply embedded in such rigid contexts. Hence, the study of displacement is shifted from the confines of the border crossing or the refugee camp.

Taking into consideration the material effects of structures of governance, how does a study focusing on migrant movements challenge existing understandings of protracted displacement? How do refugees and forced migrants move within the matrix of refugee governance to constitute their own migration experiences and enact the sites lived in during protracted displacement? What are the implications for studying displacement when the focus on institutions or borders is broadened to include how migrants themselves make these spaces what they are?

To answer these questions, I start with a brief examination of the literature on Syrian migration to Jordan, with a particular focus on how regional displacement is studied. I draw out some of the wider systems of governance to show how migrants work within these structures, both resisting and operating through them. Next, I consider how these spaces within displacement narratives are co-constituted by the migrants themselves. In doing so, I focus on Zaatari village, a dynamic hosting community close to refugee hotspots. This village was selected because it represents wider migration patterns in the Middle East of refugees self-settling in urban environments, rather than in formal camps. This site is constituted by kinship, historical, social and labor movements that have lived consequences in the present. It represents a space that has worked within the wider confines of refugee governance, yet has simultaneously been enacted by the movement and communicative practices of the migrant.

**The Study of Regional Displacement and Syrian Migration**

Since 2011, there has been an immense canon of scholarly work completed on the Syrian crisis and the subsequent mass displacement of Syrians. Such work has included studies on international humanitarian responses, the effect of the crisis on Europe, the internally displaced within Syria and the regional responses to the mass movement of Syrians across its neighboring borders into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Specifically, the studies focused on Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have produced rich insights into the experiences of Syrians in cross-border protracted displacement, drawing on the political, legal, economic and tribal systems of care and control pertaining to refugee governance (Pallister-Wilkins 2016). Previously, the literature has analyzed refugee governing strategies of (non)encampment (Turner 2015; Gatter 2017), hosting communities (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016b, 2018), social networks amongst urban refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018; Betts et al. 2017; Chatty 2013; Stevens 2016), faith-based NGOs (Wagner 2018), the political economy of hosting states (Turner 2015), the histories of previous refugee populations (Chatty 2017), pre-existing labor routes (Oesch 2014; Wagner 2017) and state policies of integration, protection, border control and security (Şahin Mencütek 2019; Achilli 2015; Achilli et al. 2017), to name but a few.

Such studies, however, predominantly frame the regional cross-border mass movement of refugee populations within wider narratives of security, political economy or international politics. For example, Zeynep Şahin Mencütek's (2019) comparative study of refugee governance in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan focuses primarily on state policies and their motivations, seeking to find potential patterns of governance and policy shifts over time. Similarly, Lewis Turner's (2015) study of (non)encampment policies in Lebanon and Jordan centers around an excavation of the economic and labor markets to analyze the reasons behind the differing policies of governance put forth onto refugee populations. Dawn Chatty (2017) and Ann-Christin Wagner (2020) utilize a historical framework in their studies of Syrian displacement, drawing out the kinship and tribal connections that 'continue to characterize community and

individual relations across modern state borders' (Chatty 2017, 26). In doing so, the histories of regional displacement in both colonial and postcolonial contexts are analyzed, alongside pre-war labor patterns and previous nomadic experiences as drivers of movement. Matthew Stevens (2016) pushes this analysis further to discuss these social networks and subsequent social capital between Syrians and Jordanians to suggest that social networks between Syrians and Jordanians, although once strong, have dwindled and fatigued due to a lack of support from international aid organizations as the situation turned to one of protracted displacement.

While important dynamics to consider under the guise of protracted displacement, these studies focus on the experience of refugees through dynamics far removed from the refugees themselves, often with attention given to the motivations behind policies or the experiences of the migrant in relation to such governance policies, after the fact. Such processes risk de-historicizing the migrant, disconnecting them from a multiplicity of experiences and survival mechanisms. In doing so, these studies risk overlooking how refugees themselves enact their own situation within displacement and how they articulate their displacement experiences through their own movements. This involves careful consideration of the reasons behind movement and how movement itself constitutes the situation of the refugee and the sites within which refugees work. Put differently, by centralizing the movements, which take place within the context of displacement, as a form of communicative practice, such movement cannot be understood as simply border crossing, fleeing from violence or refuge seeking. Movement conceptualized in such terms connects refugee governance because of displacement, while incorporating the particular and contextual relationship of movement in the creation of a site.

Drawing on critical human geography, I argue that sites and situations are not only created from the borders drawn, the policies produced or the apparatus built to contain and control, but also through human activity; by what migrants do to enact the space for themselves. As critical geographer and border historian Matthew Ellis (2015, 415) contends, the practices of cartography do not erase the imagined meaning or 'human activity "inscribed" upon space'. Space is given meaning through the social processes of those who live in the space, alongside the wider geopolitical power dynamics at play. Therefore, it is not the borders or boundaries created by imperial powers, state actors or international aid organizations that should be the sole focus in studies of protracted displacement. Rather, it should incorporate how the territory itself is made in the imagination of those who use the space: the 'patterns of usage and histories of settlement' (Ellis 2015, 415).

**Constructing Displacement Differently: Labor, Law and Hosting Histories**

The practices of governance discussed in this section, I argue, obfuscate diverse articulations and experiences of space that divulge alternative strategies and possibilities for the politics of movement. Practices of movement, from economic labor patterns, to family and kinship bonds, to accessing goods and other resources, are an important part of connected local histories.

Prior to the Syrian Revolution, Levantine neighbors would travel and work freely across the borders. The Syrian middle classes found business opportunities in Damascus, Beirut and Amman, creating circulatory patterns of labor. These 'mobile strategies' were far from linear, as Syrians – both the rural low-skilled laborers and the urban middle-classes – travelled back and forth between sites for professional reasons (Oesch 2014). Crucially, those who travelled for work – for example, teachers, actors, artists – justified their movement not within a displacement narrative, but rather as an inability to do their job (Oesch 2014). As the violence increased and people were forced to leave Syria, many continued these circulatory patterns, showing how mobility cannot be understood in isolation from its history: it is 'not a new phenomenon but rather an extension of their movements before the crisis' (Oesch 2014).

Similarly, many males sought work in northern Jordan prior to the war. Syrians partook in low-skilled, manual labor revealing important 'translocal mobilities' beyond the framework of 'conflict-induced displacement' (Wagner 2020, 184). When the war began, Syrians with a history of working in the agricultural sector in north Jordan 'capitaliz[ed] on old employment networks' to make a living (Wagner 2017, 110). These cross-border economic patterns reflect why many Syrians did not register on arrival in Jordan or Lebanon, as many did not consider themselves refugees (Oesch 2014). Recognizing and incorporating such circulatory border patterns as the economic, social and desired norms that existed prior to the conflict has been lost in practices of refugee governance. Cross-border kinship and labor

connections existed long before the civil war, yet this crisis placed immense pressure on these employment, family and tribal links.

In the wider context of refugee governance in the Levant since 2011, neither Jordan nor Lebanon has signed the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Historically, Chatty (2017, 26) contends, 'the Arab and Syrian institution of hospitality and refuge' created space for the movement of peoples across vast areas of land, throughout the past century as brother Arabs. Such people were often well looked after by both the state and society, through integration programs, the granting of citizenship and the offer of land and other provisions to encourage self-sufficiency as soon as possible (Chatty 2017, 25–26).

When Syrians in large numbers began to cross these borders, Lebanon and Jordan took significantly different approaches to the influx of Syrians. Dating back to the Ottoman Empire, refugee resolutions in the region had been based on traditional understandings of personhood, grounded in Arab, Islamic or tribal notions of brotherhood, refugee or guest. International or 'Western' humanitarianism in the Levant had not played a significant role. Lebanon continued with these traditions, choosing to cope with their Syrian neighbors independently of international aid networks through 'civil society engagement' (Chatty 2017, 56).

Jordan, on the other hand, invited the UNHCR into its borders, creating the first Syrian refugee camp, Zaatari, in 2012 to dispel 'makeshift settlements' near cities and towns (Hoffman 2017, 103). Despite being praised during the initial influx of Syrians as 'generous and hospitable', access for certain people – 'unaccompanied male youths', for example – became increasingly difficult (Chatty 2017, 29). Security, rather than hosting, was replaced as the dominant narrative. In utilizing international humanitarian governance, the Jordanian government further reinforced the correlation between migrant and security, drawing on the colonial Syrian-Jordanian border to solidify who belongs and who represents the 'other'. Many of those from the Syrian governorates of Homs or Dara'a did not view themselves as refugees, but rather drew on their tribal histories for belonging. However, such policies constructed 'Syrian' Bedouins as refugees, and therefore distinctly as not belonging (Wagner 2020, 176). Extending this further, many Syrians in Jordan found the term refugee condescending and chose to ignore this label altogether (Simpson and Abo Zayed 2019, 6). Such linguistic preferences depict how familial connections far outweigh modern categorizations in governance.

Historically, prior to the crisis, Jordan welcomed migrants and refugees into its borders as a key hosting country in the region (Achilli et al. 2017). Identifying the wider histories of displacement in the Levant helps unravel the complexity of the paths taken by Lebanon and Jordan, and the contexts in which forced migrants were able to communicate strategies of movement in order to shape their new circumstances. Turner (2015) posits that Jordan's initial policies towards Syrians were prompted largely by their hosting history, namely that of Palestinians and Iraqis, and the saturation of these populations in the labor market. While camps were built in Jordan for Palestinian refugees after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, these spaces were deemed 'a serious source of political instability' (Turner 2015, 392). However, governance policies changed dramatically as Iraqi refugees headed to Jordan not due to security dynamics, but rather due to the capital and resources of those arriving. Initially, Iraqis arriving in 2005 were 'overwhelmingly urban, educated and upper- and middle-class', and therefore were not labelled 'refugees' by the Jordanian regime (Turner 2015, 392). Iraqis were able to integrate themselves into society due to their class status and economic potential. Given their position, camps were not built and Jordan did not seek international aid until late 2006 (Turner 2015, 393). However, in initially choosing a policy of non-encampment for Iraqi refugees, Jordan was unable to later gain the adequate recognition required for international funding.

Subsequently, when Syrians began arriving in large numbers, Jordan constructed policies of encampment and severe economic restrictions to both control movement and justify international funding. Turner (2015) argues that security concerns were only partially responsible for such policies. Economic considerations were fundamental to displacement decision-making. Governance strategies had to balance the domestic impact of those crossing the border from lower socioeconomic classes who had limited resources, while considering the demands of the Jordanian workforce which had already begun to show discontent at the arrival of Syrians, simultaneously highlighting the need for international support and finance (Turner 2015, 394–396).

### Zaatari Village under North Jordan's Displacement Narrative

Zaatari village is one such place that has been co-constituted by Syrians and Jordanians who enact their own situations in displacement through moving, working and communicating, thereby utilizing the site as an effective space to live, despite the policies of governance permeating throughout. The village has been reshaped and reconstituted by displacement since 2011. As a hosting community, both Syrians and Jordanians living here have suffered from immense economic hardship and social pressure due to gaps in aid provision (AFCI 2019). Jordanians and Syrians share access to resources and space, often relying on pre-existing and re-activated social, economic and historical networks. This site represents a multiplicity of communicative movements characterized by labor and local historical geographies, wider patterns of community movement between the Syrian areas of Dara'a and Homs and its proximity to the border and refugee hotspots.

Within the settlement, land was provided by relatives for free, allowing refugees to build their own homes at a fraction of the cost compared to other areas (Wagner 2020, 182). Those who have the financial means have been allowed to build concrete houses and other infrastructure, such as shops, in order to make a living (Omari 2014). At the heart of the village lies a 'makeshift tent city' – around 50 percent of refugees living in the village live in tents (Wagner 2020, 180). Some tents have electricity, and homes often consist of multiple tents to accommodate larger families. Many newly arrived Syrians provide cheap labor as tilers, field workers or bakers in exchange for a site to live on or access to electricity (Wagner 2020).

In the study of displacement, the reasons behind why and where one seeks refuge are often minimized. The role of transnational connections has been understudied, both in the context of the Syrian uprising and in its aftermath of mass displacement. Currently, '80 percent of the Syrian refugee flow across international borders is self-settling in cities, towns and villages where they have social and economic networks' (Chatty 2017, 26). Such decision-making strategies help piece together a dynamic puzzle of local social histories and imaginaries of space and identity, while having profound implications for the analysis of refugee governance.

Since 2014, the governance policies imposed on Syrians in Jordan have become significantly harsher. For those living in urban spaces, it is increasingly difficult to access basic services, such as food programs, health care provision and education. Syrians who work without appropriate documentation risk exploitation through longer hours and lower wages than their Jordanian counterparts. However, contrary to popular belief, Syrians who are working in Jordan's labor markets have predominantly replaced other migrant workers in specific sectors, rather than replace Jordanians themselves (Turner 2015, 396). Urban refugees living in severe poverty are at risk of 'arrest [and] exploitation' and are forced to decide between moving to a formal camp or being deported back to Syria should they seek informal employment opportunities (Achilli 2015, 7). As the situation progressed to one of protracted displacement by 2014, Syrians who entered Jordan were encouraged to stay in designated areas controlled by international humanitarianism in an attempt to curtail Syrians from urban spaces. These strategies of tightening opportunities and services for refugees are a direct attempt to control movement.

Chatty (2017, 26) argues that, in order to understand the nature of Syrian displacement and Jordanian hosting in the present, the historical networks and 'ethno-religious communities' must be extrapolated. Many of those who fled to northern Jordan came predominantly from Homs and Dara'a and share with north Jordanians a belonging to the Beni Khaled Bedouin (Wagner 2020, 181). Within Syria, although many of the rural populations – from Homs to Aleppo to Palmyra in the west – moved into the cities and towns for education and employment, 'kinship ties through tribe, clan and family still matter' (Chatty 2015). These kinship ties are fundamental for understanding how relationships and routines have shaped villages and towns in northern Jordan and the present movements during war and displacement. In a sub-national study of the Jordanian response to Syrian migration, Mafraq, the city closest to the Syrian border in the study, was shown to be more welcoming and accessible to Syrians than the cities of Sahab and Zarqa, precisely because of the 'extended cross-border kinship networks' (Betts et al. 2017, 12). Interesting to note, and disputed among academic scholars of the region, is how the economy was deemed less central than these tribal links. Still, the importance of the local context within this study cannot be denied given the proximity of this site to Syria and the subsequent kinship links.

Despite debate, it holds true that communication between these communities has been upheld through years of visits and marital ties, therefore allowing newly arrived Syrians to feel welcomed and connected by a 'common ancestry' – 'the same dialect and the same family' (Wagner 2020, 181). Although unable to verify, Ann-Christin Wagner (2020) recalls a story from an interlocutor who suggested 'Zaatari Village was founded by Syrians in the 1960s, and in return each had received Jordanian citizenship for their services to the town'. Although immense strain has been put on the economies of these rural towns and settlements, there is a 'passive acceptance… endured partly because of longstanding kingship ties that predate the conflict' (Betts et al. 2017, 12).

In a similar vein, Matthew Stevens (2016) asserts the desire and need for friends and family during emergencies, relaying the importance of identity and social networks during displacement. In doing so, he echoes Wagner's (2020, 182) statement that 'where Syrians seek refuge and how well they fare in exile depends on the type of pre-war transnational connections'. Many Syrians, in 'reactivating older notions of tribal identity… subvert[ed] state logics of containment' (Wagner 2020, 184).

One arrangement that illustrates the importance of these prior links was the bailout scheme, which allowed Jordanians to sponsor their Syrian relatives, helping them avoid refugee camps. As restrictions in 2014 became tighter, this scheme was one of the only ways in which Syrians could legally leave the camp and gain access to services provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the Jordanian government (Achilli 2015, 5–6). Sponsors had to be 'over 35 years of age, married, with a stable job, no police record and [in] a direct family relation' of the Syrian; yet even with these credentials, bailouts were not always approved (Achilli 2015, 5–6). Hence, Syrians found it increasingly difficult to move within urban spaces and legally leave the camp (Achilli 2015).

Although the official bailout scheme ended in 2015 at the request of Jordanian authorities, many of the Syrians who were granted refuge did so through 'host families related either by blood or marriage, particularly those fleeing from Der'a and its surrounding villages' (Chatty 2017, 31). Having such 'transnational kinship networks' provided Syrian refugees with more security in the form of a 'legal status, material resources and livelihoods' (Wagner, cited in Lenhard and Samanani 2020, 181). Navigating through systems of governance together, many Syrians were able to avoid the harsh conditions of the camp, favoring instead local integration.

Wagner (2020, 181) describes the story of Abu Mohammed, whose movements represented a specific form of communication dictated by strong 'transnational kinship networks'. Abu Mohammed phoned relatives before his journey from Homs began, informing his family of his plans. On arrival in Jordan, his extended Jordanian family were waiting for him to finalize his papers and return to Zaatari village with him, rather than the formal camp (Wagner 2020). For Abu Mohammed, seeking passage over the border reflected an ancestry of movement, a historic understanding that held solidarity with kinsmen (relatives) far above regulations of displacement governance. This extended family navigated their way through governing apparatus drawing on entangled histories of movement – associated with labor, family and land – which threw into contention the categories used to govern displacement.

However, while these kinship ties and complex geographic social histories should not be ignored, drawing on these links alone does not capture the complexity of dynamics within protracted displacement. North Jordan's encampment policies in 2012 were driven by both government officials and by tribal leaders, who were concerned about the strain on rural northern villages given the volume of Syrians crossing the border (Turner 2015, 392, 395). The northern governorate of Mafraq comprises many communities of 5,000 persons or fewer, and with the influx of Syrians – estimated between 70,000 and 200,000 – these settlements were forced to change dramatically (Turner 2015, 396). Turner, in analyzing displacement within an economic framework, draws out two important aspects relating to movement within displacement: the class and resources of the refugee – what they bring with them – and how these elements fit into the sites to and within which they move.

With '58 percent of out-of-camp Syrians' from rural backgrounds and less well-educated than their Jordanian counterparts, many of the Syrians from the poorer regions of Dara'a and Homs are more likely to settle in towns and villages in the north that have a cheaper cost of living than the larger cities or the capital (Turner 2015, 396). While the previous refugee population, comprising wealthy Iraqis, moved to Amman, poorer Syrians did not have the financial ability to settle in such spaces. Furthermore, this population is comprised of many unskilled laborers, who

work in the agricultural sectors based outside of cities. These smaller towns and villages already experience high unemployment, and Syrians – many of whom accept lower wages than Jordanians – exacerbate the hardship experienced by hosting communities (Turner 2015). This shows us that, within the study of displacement, capacity for movement must be explored alongside the contextual decisions of how and where to move.

Wagner (2017) exposes the survival mechanisms of many of the younger generations from rural families in Mafraq, a city close to Zaatari village. These strategies work beyond displacement narratives or humanitarian governance understandings, rather relying on 'translocal mobility schemes' that existed long before 2011 (Wagner 2017, 113). Prior to the crisis, rural communities, often from lower socioeconomic classes, relied on 'the contribution of all family members', including the involvement of minors in agricultural labor and early marriage (Wagner 2017, 112). Lower-class Syrians had in-depth experience of 'short-term seasonal migration', crossing the border in order to make ends meet for their families (Wagner 2017, 113). Not only did these economic ties link to kinship experiences, but they also supported Jordan's agricultural land needs (Betts et al. 2017,12). Therefore, in the specific context of northern Jordan, the socioeconomic dynamics and movement norms prior to the crisis are fundamental to understanding the patterns of communication, which take place within the refugee governance rubric.

## Conclusion

Analyzing experiences of displacement through the conceptualization of movement as creative communication, draws on a multiplicity of motivations, histories, relations, needs, requirements and forces. Combined, they co-constitute the situations and sites in experiences of displacement. In prioritizing the movements of forced migrants as the object of study, and how this movement interacts with the power structures governing border crossings, urban settlements or camps, such sites can be theorized as spaces of communication whereby refugees enact their own situations in spite of oppressive forces. Evoking such a framework allows for the inclusion of an analysis of the political, economic, legal and social, but it does so through an understanding that the migrants themselves – working within these categories and policies – simultaneously enact these spaces by their very presence and movement.

Within the context of protracted displacement, movement is often stifled by the state, national borders or through interactions with humanitarian apparatuses. Framing movement as creative communication does not deny this, but rather facilitates a discussion on the highly contextual need to study displacement, focusing on migrant movement not as a linear practice, but as belonging to wider circulatory, translocal patterns. The movements of people are explicit iterations made to constitute their own situations.

Centralizing movement reveals the power migrants have to enact their own spaces and situations, where usually the conditions of the spaces projected upon them through domestic or international governing policies are the focus. I identify an interconnected web of communication strategies and histories often ignored within the traditional study of displacement. Such a methodology presents the refugee or forced migrant not as a subject to be governed, but rather a dynamic and complex individual, entangled in power dynamics often beyond their control. The case of Zaatari village shows how migrants hold a capacity to enact sites and situations through their very presence and relationship to structured governance.

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