Rethinking the lessons from Za'atari refugee camp

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Humanitarian efforts to build a model refugee camp when constructing Azraq camp in Jordan – drawing on what was supposed to have been learned in Za'atari camp – missed crucial aspects of Za'atari's governance.

Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, the second largest camp in the world and temporary home for 80,000 Syrians, was built in 2012, materialising over two weeks as thousands of Syrians fled the city of Dara'a in southwestern Syria. The physical infrastructure of the camp was poor in its early days. Tents collapsed in the muddy sand in the winter, refugees demonstrated against both the conditions in the camp and the war at home, and the environment was one of general distrust. Two years later, humanitarians in Jordan attempted to build a new model camp: Azraq. However, although Za'atari is considered by humanitarians to have failed in many respects, it is by far the more popular camp among refugees.

Za'atari

Za'atari's rapid development into the fourth-largest city in Jordan[1] is often credited solely to the resilience of its entrepreneurial camp dwellers. But the camp's humanitarian governance also played a key role in this, as public spaces for refugees were allowed to form on an impromptu basis using facilities provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as schools, bread distribution centres and medical clinics. When the first arrivals took advantage of regular foot traffic along the camp's main road to open up independent shops, creating what is known as the Shams Élysées (playing on the name of the Avenue des Champs Élysées, a prestigious street in Paris, with *Sham* meaning Syria in Arabic), UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, did not shut it down but rather negotiated with shopkeepers to regulate its size and electricity usage. In fact, NGOs make constant concessions to allow a degree of camp development that can be regulated for the sake of security but that allows

The 'Shams-Élysées', Za'atari refugee camp.

UNHCR/Ivor Prickett

conditions to remain livable for residents. Former camp manager Kilian Kleinschmidt made it a part of his job to get to know the leaders of Za'atari's informal networks, many of which had transferred from Dara'a, in order to establish trust between humanitarian and refugee leadership.

The original blueprints for Za'atari had envisaged tents, and eventually caravans, organised in neat symmetrical rows – easier to manage and more presentable for visiting donors. Those in charge even created a map of Za'atari, the first ever satellite map of a refugee camp.[2] But as refugees shifted their temporary homes to be closer to relatives or to join up with other caravans, the map became less aesthetically geometric, revealing unplanned cul-de-sacs, improvised home expansion and uneven crowding. As Za'atari appears today, no two caravans look the same, much of the infrastructure has been painted to imitate Dara'a's greenery, and hundreds of small private and public gardens have been planted in the desert terrain.

Za'atari's humanitarian apparatus, while limiting refugee activity, has also made an effort to engage with refugees on an individual level. Although humanitarian interventions in the camp could do better to address men's needs, many women are being supported in taking on the role of primary provider for their families. Young women who attend NGO programming are finding the courage to resist early marriage in favour of school or work. Young men who need to earn money can train in technology, barbering and sewing so they do not have to resort to physically arduous and often exploitative labour for little pay, such as transporting wheelbarrows of gravel around the camp. Aid workers have acted as mentors to children to encourage them to attend school regularly and work towards the profession they want.

Azraq
The drive into Azraq reveals a striking contrast to Za'atari. The entrance to Za'atari is always filled with aid workers and refugees coming and going. In Azraq, NGO vehicles are the only traffic heading down a long one-

way road. At first glance, rows upon rows of caravans conceal any evidence of activity. Neglected basketball courts give the camp an air of dereliction. Azraq looks more like a storage depot than a long-term home for people fleeing violence.

Azraq's planners wanted to construct the camp in such a way as to create villages within the camp in order to preserve traditional Syrian community structures while also accommodating the needs of those deemed more vulnerable: single women and mothers, people with disabilities, and the elderly. However, there was also an overarching – and overwhelming – objective to ensure security. Built in an isolated region of the northeastern desert, Azraq is far more secluded than Za'atari. Jordanian army vehicles are stationed at high points on the outskirts of Azraq, facing outward to the desert, as well as at the camp's entrance and exit where officers check permits for both aid workers and vehicles. While these measures point to efforts to keep the camp's refugees safe from external threats, a drive through Azraq reveals that security in reality prioritises the safety of humanitarian workers. The administrative base camp for NGO offices is a ten-minute car ride to the nearest of Azraq's villages. Compared with Za'atari's dense layout of markets, NGO centres and caravans across twelve districts in five square kilometres, Azraq's four villages, designed to accommodate up to 130,000 refugees, are separated across 15 square kilometres by large plots of unoccupied space – and the emptiness is overwhelming. Ironically, the abundance of space in Azraq is designed to limit refugees' movement; political demonstrations are harder to organise when mobilisation is a challenge and the community is physically disconnected.

Many aid workers state that Azraq's organisation is what sets it apart as a model camp. In addition to the security benefits, it is meant to make things more convenient for aid workers, with one humanitarian citing camp NGOs' unprecedented use of data sharing via Google Drive. This implies that the camp runs more efficiently than Za'atari but instead it has in fact introduced layers of bureaucracy

that Za'atari's comparative disorderliness has managed mostly to circumvent. The result: a heavily controlled, miserable and half-empty enclosure of symmetrical districts that restricts economic activity, movement and self-expression. Some refugees have likened the camp to an outdoor prison, while humanitarian observers have described it as a dystopian nightmare.

Critical differences

Azraq's humanitarian planners missed a critical difference between the populations of both camps. Za'atari is refuge to Syrians who fled Assad's crackdown on Dara'a, the city where their revolution began, and many had participated in the early demonstrations against Assad. Some of those who arrived or were assigned to Azraq had also come from Dara'a but many had fled from Homs and Aleppo, and a significant portion fled ISIS in Raqqa and are less likely to be politically active than their Dara'awi counterparts in Za'atari. Thus, despite Azraq's extensive planning of the first two villages constructed (Villages 3 and 6) to prevent the kind of political expression witnessed in Za'atari, those in charge found themselves continually improvising, adding the next two villages (5 and then 2) to respond to groups of Syrians fleeing new developments in the Syrian conflict. 21,000 Syrians who were kept at the Rukban border after fleeing ISIS in 2016 were accepted into Jordan on condition that they would be held in Village 5 until cleared to move to the newly built Village 2.[3] Two years later, the lack of electricity in both of these villages is in stark contrast to the image of preparedness projected in 2014.[4]

By prioritising organisation and security, Azraq's humanitarian system has restricted the potential for refugee livelihoods activities. Separating the villages to limit political mobility also interferes with daily routine, making it difficult for refugees to go to the supermarket or to attend meetings hosted by NGOs. Aid workers are also affected, having to wait hours sometimes for transport to travel between villages. Unlike in Za'atari, where unofficial public spaces arose spontaneously in the many areas where refugees were undertaking daily activities, Azraq's endless space has actually left little room for meaningful communal areas. Featuring a few rows of benches squared in by caravan offices, the community centres in each village are designed more for refugees to wait to speak to officials than for community building. Created and managed by Azraq's governing agencies, the marketplaces are quieter and emptier than Za'atari's bustling Shams Élysées and offer only a small number of shops that refugees are allowed to run. Apart from the market, Azraq runs an incentive-based volunteering scheme for refugees to work for NGOs on a rotational basis but the high demand means that the 14,000 refugees who have registered usually spend 11 months of each year waiting for their turn.

Of course, the resilience of Azraq's residents can be seen: families enjoying tea in the shade in the mornings, the makeshift shelving units that transform one-room caravans into a more functional space, the gardens that many have planted, and the small independent shops or salons run out of caravans. As the Syrians of Za'atari have adapted, so too have the Syrians of Azraq. But what makes Za'atari work – for a refugee camp – is everything that Azraq has chosen to prevent from the start: organic development, economic opportunity, a sense of community. While Za'atari did not have time to prepare for the arrival of refugees, it has nevertheless grown into a space where there is always something for residents to participate in. Azraq, on the other hand, is designed for waiting: waiting for services, waiting for work, waiting for return.

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1. http://bit.ly/Oxfam-Zaatari

2. Maps for Za-atari and Asraq available at (respectively): http://bit.ly/Zaatari-map http://bit.ly/Azraq-map

3. https://apnews.com/5782dcbf32af4fb19f78de317717bd1b

4. http://bit.ly/UNHCR-2014-Azraq