A no-camp policy: Interrogating informal settlements in Lebanon

Romola Sanyal

Department of Geography and Environment, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

As fewer refugees move into formal camps, what kinds of non-camp spaces are emerging and how does that challenge the ways in which we understand the management and politics of refuge? This paper seeks to shed light on this question through an analysis of informal settlements in Lebanon. The Syrian crisis has displaced millions of people, most of whom have moved into neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The Lebanese government, faced with a longer history of Palestinian camps and their militarization has refused to allow the establishment of official refugee camps for Syrians. As a result of this 'no camp' policy, Syrians are forced to either live in private rented accommodation in towns and cities throughout the country, or in informal settlements (ISes) built on private, often agricultural land. These informal settlements are built and developed through a complex assemblage of humanitarianism, hospitality, security, economic and political considerations. In this paper, I look at the physical and social spaces of informal settlements in the Bekaa Valley, Eastern Lebanon, examining how differential access to aid, support, security and tacit recognition by the state has led to variations amongst them. In doing so, I expose how an informalized response to the crisis through a system of deregulation is enabling refugee spaces to emerge that are visible, yet unrecognized, flexible, yet precarious. These spaces destabilize the city/camp dichotomy by drawing together elements of both. In engaging with debates on informality, the paper contributes to a growing critical literature on refugee geographies and seeks to expand beyond the reductive narratives of refugee camps, thereby offering insights into refugee futures in increasingly uncertain times.

1. Introduction

On a bright morning, as we drove on the road to Zahle from Bar Elias in the Bekaa Valley, my research assistant pointed out a cluster of white tents just off the highway. It wasn't a particularly large cluster; only a few dozen tents were visible, but it was one of many scattered across agricultural fields that could be seen from roads and highways crossing the Bekaa valley. She noted that these were some of the informal settlements for Syrians. Perhaps it was because I had not anticipated seeing the settlements so close to the road that I thought it was a strange sight – white sheets clustered behind buildings, amongst farmlands, these tents were simultaneously hidden and visible, symbolizing perhaps, the fate of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, being made invisible through governmental policies, yet being starkly present through their sheer numbers.

Since 2011, over a million Syrians have crossed into Lebanon due to the on-going civil war in their country. Lebanon and Syria have historically shared a relatively open border, which has made crossing into Lebanon a far easier process than migrating into Jordan, which also shares a border with Syria. The two countries have also had a long and

contentious history,[1] and Syrian workers have, over the years, come to Lebanon to work in agriculture, construction and other trades. With the war erupting, however, this relationship has undergone further changes. Until 2015, the movement between Syria and Lebanon has been fairly unrestricted, following the long-established policies of not requiring visas at the border. Many families have also extended unconditional hospitality to refugees. However, as numbers have continued to grow, and the crisis has become more protracted, it has caused growing tensions between refugees and local communities. Refugees have added pressure to families already struggling to cope economically, and overwhelmed infrastructure and resources in many parts of the country (Fawaz et al., 2014; Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2014; Yassin et al., 2015). Furthermore, although many Syrians fled to Lebanon due to the war, they have not been classified by the Government of Lebanon (GoL) as refugees but as displaced persons or de facto refugees – categories that do not offer any legal protection in Lebanon, a country that is also not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Bidinger et al., 2015; HRW, 2016; Naufal, 2012). The magnitude of the crisis has also played into larger existential politics in the host country. After 1 million Syrians were officially registered in the

country by summer 2014, the Lebanese government decided to restrict the migration of Syrians into the country by creating stricter visa and work requirements. These include requiring a sponsor and paying $200 per person to renew residency status (HRW, 2016).[2] The financial costs of these have been particularly burdensome to poorer Syrians, most of whom have stopped renewing their papers and now live in the country illegally (HRW, 2016). The lack of legal protection or status has created a deeply marginalizing situation for them.

A key aspect of Lebanese policies towards displaced Syrians has been the refusal to allow the establishment of formal refugee camps by humanitarian organizations. As a result, innumerable informal settlements have proliferated across private agricultural lands. An informal settlement is defined as "…a settlement that was established in an unplanned and unmanaged manner, which means they are generally unrecognized. There may or may not be an informal or formal agreement between landlords and residents of the settlement. The 2015 Lebanon Shelter Sector Strategy formally defines an Informal Settlement as: 'Unofficial group of temporary residential structures, often comprising of plastic-sheeting and timber structures and can be of any size from one to several hundred tents. Informal Settlements may have some informal community-led management.'"[3] These informal and transient spaces offer a degree of flexibility to residents, in that they can work, move in and out of ISes at their own risk. Interestingly many of these 'informal settlements', also incorporate spatial features and governmental practices similar to 'camps', such as forms of screening and policing of residents, but without the formal legitimacy granted to them either through the state or humanitarian organizations. This 'informality' of status and of materiality also has variations, which is contingent on the ways in which humanitarian organizations, landlords, and the state intersect with each other. This situation gives rise to the key argument of this paper: that given the increased decampment of refugees and their move into other non-camp spaces such as cities, we need to pay closer attention to the role of informality in their production. Through careful spatial analyses, we need to interrogate how these settlements inhabit the grey space of legitimacy and what that means for the future of refugee politics and humanitarian governance.

While theorizations on the refugee camp are useful in the study of these spaces, they are inadequate, in that they fail to account for the ways in which socio-economic relations and the limited capacity of the state can produce other kinds of refugee spaces. Here, the debates on informality, borrowed from urban studies becomes useful in unpacking the ways in which the privatized responses have emerged in a context of deregulation and crisis, thus producing spaces that are transient, flexible, and marginal. The paper elaborates on these ideas, challenging the dichotomy between cities and camps in studies of refugee spaces and argues instead that spaces of refuge lie on a spectrum between the two. Paying close attention to how different politics of humanitarianism, hospitality, economics, informality and security intersect in these spaces can help us understand the ways in which different forms of refuge may evolve in the future as displacements and crises become more complex and protracted.

In considering the relationship between the settlements and host communities, it is important to consider geography and scale in this analysis. As Landau (2003) demonstrates from his work on Tanzania, refugee influxes into a country and into specific regions can lead to geographical variance in governmental practice as well as the

relationships between citizens, refugees and the state. Despite the fragmentation of state authority and its responsibility towards citizens, the influx of refugees and perceived hardships resulting from them affects the ways in which local residents construct ideas of 'us', 'them', citizenship and belonging. Like in Tanzania, in Lebanon, not all parts of the country have been equally affected by the Syrian crisis. It has been most prominent in the Bekaa, Beirut and North Lebanon (Fawaz et al., 2014). According to the statistics reported by UNHCR in June 2015, there were 655 informal settlements with 74,450 of registered Syrian refugees in the Bekaa governorate in Eastern Lebanon alone. I thus focus on the Bekaa as this it has one of the largest populations of Syrian refugees and informal settlements and because of its closeness to the border.

The fieldwork is part of a larger project that took place over a two year period between summer 2014 and summer 2016 and looked at the urbanization of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. I was interested in understanding how the Syrian crisis had affected the infrastructure and urban governance in urban and peri-urban regions in Lebanon. In conducting fieldwork in Bar Elias, it became impossible to ignore the presence of informal settlements that so strongly affected the issues of development and governance in the municipality. Thus we included interviews and field visits to the informal settlements as part of our research plan.

The data used here is gleaned from policy papers, NGO reports as well as fieldwork in the informal settlements in the municipality. I undertook field visits to the Bekaa with my research assistant and she continued many of the visits to the informal settlements after I left. The discussions used are therefore gleaned from the visits we undertook together as well as ones where my research assistant undertook them on her own. Our interviews involved a range of stakeholders, from NGO workers, municipal authorities, landowners on whose land these settlements are hosted, to the refugees themselves. Our visits to the informal settlements were always facilitated by members of the municipality or the Regional Technical Office (RTO) or NGOs. It is important to acknowledge here that having members of the municipality, particularly police, who accompanied us to several of the settlements, clearly affected the people we were able to access, the kinds of interviews undertaken and data that we gathered. These were often people in positions of power in the settlement and very often men. Hence, on the one hand they enabled us to gain access to the settlements fairly easily, but on the other hand, our relationship with them undoubtedly modified and muted many of the criticisms that Syrians living in the settlements would have otherwise expressed. However, we were not entirely sure if it was possible to access these spaces without a gate-keeper-be they municipal workers or NGO workers-as these settlements are located on private land, and had security set up at the entrances to several of them. It appeared to be problematic (though perhaps not impossible) to simply walk into one of these places and do research, especially as both my research assistant and I were outsiders in this context.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first, I draw upon the literature on refugees and specifically refugee camps, self-settlements urban refugees and informality. I also look at a brief history of Palestinian camps in Lebanon that have played an important role in determining the no-camp policies towards the current Syrian crisis. In the second part I discuss two settlements in the Bekaa Valley to highlight the varied nature of these spaces both in terms of their physical spaces, and also the kinds of security they are subjected to. I then unpack the implications of informality and informal settlements on the politics and governance of refugees before concluding.

2. Spaces of refuge

Geography has been particularly attentive to the unfolding of humanitarian crises in different parts of the world and the impacts these have had on migration, borders, detention, and the encampment of

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[2] These policies have been modified as of earlier this year and they waive the annual $200 residency fee for Syrians provided "they registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) before January 1, 2015, or obtained residency through their UNHCR certificate at least once in 2015 or 2016" (HRW, 2016). The policy nevertheless continues to exclude nearly half a million Syrians who are not registered with UNHCR. See https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/14/lebanon-new-refugee-policy-step-forward.

[3] Definition taken from https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-refugeees-informal-settlements-in-lebanon. Last accessed 2nd January 2017.