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Hannah Owens

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Channelling (in)security: governing movement and ordinary life in 'imagined geographies'

Hannah Owens

School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article is led by a specific ethnographic encounter on a public bus from Amman towards Zaatari village in northern Jordan. I use this moment on a bus as an entry point from which to examine how Syrian urban refugees and their security are constituted by everyday encounters in seemingly banal spaces. From the vantage point of a bus journey, this article explores how urban refugees in northern Jordan are channelled in specific and violent ways by the Government of Jordan (GoJ) in relation to the geographies where they reside. Drawing on fieldwork with urban refugees living in Zaatari village, the article is shaped by three main points: (1) Refugees are not static, or fixed in spaces of the camp, but rather on-the-move. The journey taken depicts a particular precarity constituting the everyday insecurity of refugees living outside of camps. (2) Their movement is embedded in the wider mechanisms of state and humanitarian governance which increases the precarity of urban refugee mobility. (3) The precarity surrounding urban refugees is further compounded by the geographies they reside in. This article opens new lines of enquiry into urban refugee security and how experiences of (in)security may be better understood.

Introduction: insecurity as an everyday encounter

Damascus highway, Mafraq Governorate

The bus jerks to the side of the road, grinding to a halt. The deteriorating air conditioning system ceases and the bus door beside the driver grudgingly slides open. A burly looking man with a black facemask walks onto the bus. It is the police again; their checks have increased recently, averaging once a week. The process usually takes around 10 minutes, as one or two officers sidestep down the aisle seizing identification papers from all adult men. My friend and I are on our morning commute north, edging along Damascus highway to reach Zaatari village and the education centre where we are volunteering. We left Amman around 40 minutes ago and this inspection will make us late. During my first encounter with this intimidating routine, my friend, a Jordanian student living in Amman, reassured me and

CONTACT Hannah Owens h.e.r.owens@qmul.ac.uk School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

told me to look away when the officer approached: 'They can't ask you because you're a woman. You don't have to do anything'. While he glanced in my direction, seemingly surprised by the presence of a foreign, white woman, my friend was correct, and the officer continued his examination of the men onboard. Usually, around three men are accompanied off, all of whom return—a little more on edge than before—after five minutes. Marched off in convoy, they stand by the officer's 4 × 4 vehicle, as names and identification numbers are read through a radio.

On this occasion, the well-built officer, wielding authority with each boot heel clicking on the lino floor, asks the driver to step off the bus. The uniform's walk through the bus is purposeful, etching people's faces into his memory. A black beret covers his sweaty brow and you can feel the tension on the bus as he inches silently to the back. Unlike before, he appears to be searching for someone in particular as if he has been tipped off. A 20-something in a black t-shirt is taken off, a hand gripped firmly on his shoulder. The man looks young, his scrawny arm enveloped by the officer as they make their way outside into the heat. The sun immediately streams into the bus as those seated on the right-hand side pull back the heavy curtain to watch the action. The man does not return but is placed in the back of the police vehicle. Turning to my friend, confusion on my face, this event does not appear irregular to her. Interpreting the situation, she relays that the officers are checking for illegal Syrian or Egyptian workers; those without a work permit or correct residency card, who are returning from employment in Amman, either to the formal refugee camp—Zaatari—or the neighbouring area. Working with Syrian urban refugees in Zaatari village—a stone's throw away from the camp's barbed wire fence—we know many are forced to find precarious employment, away from the community. This route is known to the police; a journey taken by refugees who seek informal work as a part of their everyday life. If this man does not have the correct paperwork, as an urban-living Syrian, he could be sent to Azraq camp, or to the border, where he could face extradition from Jordan. Such a punishment could extend to his relatives—rounded up without explanation and sent to Syria.[1]

This article is led by a specific ethnographic encounter on a public bus one August morning, as I journeyed towards Zaatari village in Jordan's Northern Governorate of Mafraq. For three months, I had worked in the village as a teacher. Zaatari village is a rural host community, and sits 1 km west of Zaatari camp, the largest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. With a current estimated population of between 15,000 and 20,000, the village has doubled in size since 2012.[2] From 2011, Syrians, predominantly from the region of Homs, have crossed the southern border into Jordan; the majority of whom arrived before 2015 and self-settled in the village. Drawing on historic kinship connections and reactivating pre-war economic links,[3] the Syrians who travelled to Zaatari village became urban refugees enveloped in the Government of Jordan's (GoJ) refugee response plan.[4] This host community is home to many economically vulnerable Jordanians, where

[1]Fieldnotes, August 2021.
[2]Acting for Change International, 'Home Page', https://www.actingforchangeinternational.org/.
[3]Ann-Christin Zuntz, 'Refugees' Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances: Syrian Mobilities in the Middle East Before and After 2011', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1400–1422.
[4]Zaatari village would be classified as a rural space by its residents and in humanitarian literature, where distinctions are made between individuals living in the camp, and those living in urban areas or rural areas (see Charles Simpson and A. Abo Zayed, 'New Faces, Less Water, and a Changing Economy in a Growing City', *Refugees in Towns* (2019). https://www.refugeesintowns.org/irbid#_ftn15; Kirsi P. Kallio, Jouni Hakli and Elisa Pascucci, 'Refugeeness as political subjectivity: Experiencing the humanitarian border', *EPC: Politics and Space* 37, no. 7 (2019): 1258–1276). Despite the latter two variances, both fall under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urban refugee policy remit.

existing strains on community resources have been exacerbated by the incoming population. Employment is scarce and often seasonal, leaving many Syrian refugees to seek precarious and unstable forms of employment. The opening vignette describes a familiar encounter experienced by many urban refugees who pursue employment in Amman and its surrounding areas—many of whom do not have all the correct documentation. Despite the violent encounters between refugees and forms of governance—security services, police and surveillance—these routes and modes of transport are still being used and translate into important spaces of connection in the lives of refugees.

In this article, I take you on a bus journey from Amman, the capital of Jordan, to Zaatari village. The infrastructures and materialities of transportation, including the road, route, bus or boat, have been theorized in migration scholarship, shown to be 'mobile zones of governance and contestation' which become 'objects and settings of political action'.[5] In this case, the public bus is a 'site of strategic political action', where individuals interact with the mobile site in multiple ways.[6] I use this moment on a bus as an entry point from which to examine how Syrian urban refugees and their security is constituted by everyday encounters in seemingly banal spaces. From the vantage point of a bus journey, this article explores how urban refugees in northern Jordan are channelled in specific and violent ways by the GoJ in relation to their movement and the geographies where they reside. Drawing on fieldwork with Syrian urban refugees living in Zaatari village, the article is shaped by three main points: (1) Refugees are not static, or fixed in spaces of the camp, but rather on-the-move. The journey taken depicts a particular precarity constituting the everyday insecurity of refugees living outside of camps; (2) Their movement is embedded in the wider mechanisms of state and humanitarian governance which increases the precarity of urban refugee mobility; (3) The precarity surrounding urban refugees is further compounded by the geographies they reside in. Taken together, I contend that urban refugees are channelled through precarious structures which constitute their daily life as insecure. The journey provides a springboard from which to draw out the broader observations connecting refugee governance to experiences of urban refugee insecurity and analyse how insecurity travels through ordinary life.

The opening vignette illustrates that (in)security is not something to be 'found'. Rather, it emerges in spaces of the 'in-between'. State intervention in this remote location is a specific choice made by authorities, where officers wait until individuals have left the station and are travelling on the bus, before beginning their checks. This is a form of control over movement and livelihood-making, which Syrians rely on. By detailing experiences of urban refugee (in)security from the perspective of the journey, this article opens another line of scholarship on urban refugees in rural Jordan and the everyday precarity

While those living in urban and rural settings navigate a different set of conditions, in this article I analyse Syrian residents of Zaatari village and their experiences associated with being an 'urban' refugee, as they classify as such under UNHCR policy. While scholars and practitioners have problematized the amalgamated categories of 'urban' and 'rural' in refugee policy, where 'rural' became synonymous with 'dispersed' or 'other' (Susan Banki, 'Refugee integration in the intermediate term: a study of Nepal, Pakistan, and Kenya', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper 108. UNHCR: Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (2004): 4; Neil J. W. Crawford, *The Urbanization of Forced Displacement: UNHCR, Urban Refugees, and the Dynamics of Policy Change* (Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 176, I refer to refugees living in the rural host community of Zaatari as urban refugees.

[5]William Walters, 'Migration, vehicles, and politics: Three theses on viapolitics', *European Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 4 (2015): 473, 474.

[6]Ibid., 469, 480; Nadine Hassouneh, 'The green bus and the viapolitics of intra-state deportations in Syria', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 9 (2023): 2172–2193.

they navigate while exploring new methodological possibilities for how to study refugee experiences of (in)security on-the-move. The article moves beyond fixing refugees in the space of the camp, border or detention centre, and their corresponding securitization logics.[7] Multi-sited ethnography,[8] participation in activist networks[9] and studies on the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee sites[10] have produced generous insights into the politics of forced migration, establishing refugees and their security inside formal spaces of aid. Furthermore, while a vast amount of research has been carried out on refugee (in) security in Zaatari camp,[11] Azraq camp[12] and the neighbourhoods of Amman where Syrians are concentrated,[13] through interconnected fragments of ethnographic notes, descriptions of the cities, stations and village, and more general observations of the GoJ's security apparatus, I build a complex sense of insecurities to show how they emerge differently in the in-between from, for example, state policy alone. Uncertainty and precarity arises as a consequence of movement towards the spaces where refugees are concentrated. An urban refugee could, for example, be questioned, arrested or left alone, depending on the specific bus journey taken. Due to its geographical position and size, Zaatari village has fallen 'largely under the radar of national authorities and aid agencies'.[14] I draw on literature documenting the urban refugee experience[15] in order to contextualize this host settlement within the wider contours of Jordanian migration and refugee politics. Doing so reveals both the hidden and explicit consequences for the lives being lived in rural locations along the northern border.

Urban refugees denote the growing global trend of refugees choosing to self-settle in urban or (semi-)rural spaces, where the number of women and children are increasing, 'either as part of family units or as individuals', which is now understood to correspond to the '"normal" distribution' of the population.[16] Often residing in economically vulnerable

[7]Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Heather Johnson, 'The Other side of the Fence: Reconceptualizing the "Camp" and Migration Zones at the Borders of Spain', *International Political Sociology* 7 (2013): 75–91; Simon Turner, *Politics of Innocence: Hutu Identity, Conflict and Camp Life* (Oxford: Berghahn Press, 2010).

[8]Heather Johnson, 'Listening to Migrant Stories', in *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies*, ed. Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (London: Routledge, 2012), 67–71.

[9]Peter Nyers, 'Researching anti-deportation: Socialization as method', in *Research Methods*, 97–100.

[10]Aya Musmar, 'Lessons from Refugees', *Riba Journal* (2021). https://www.ribaj.com/intelligence/witnessing-the-refugee-camps-presidents-awards-for-research-jordan-zaatri.

[11]Dennis Sullivan and Sarah Tobin, 'Security and resilience among Syrian refugees in Jordan', *MERIP online* (2014); Sarah Tobin & Madeline Otis Campbell, 'NGO Governance and Syrian refugee "subjects" in Jordan', *MERIP online* (2016); Ayham Dalal, 'Uncovering culture and identity in refugee camps', *Humanities* 6, no.3 (2017): 61–64; Melissa Gatter, 'Restoring childhood: humanitarianism and growing up Syrians in Za'tari refugee camp', *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 2 (2017): 89–102; Lewis Turner, '#Refugees can be entrepreneurs too!' Humanitarianism, race, and the marketing of Syrian refugees', *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 137–155; Musmar, 'Lessons from Refugees' (2021).

[12]Sophia Hoffmann, 'Humanitarian security in Jordan's Azraq Camp', *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 2 (2017): 97–112; Melissa Gatter, 'Preserving order: narrating resilience as threat in Jordan's Azraq refugee camp', *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2021).

[13]Elke Grawert, 'Between aid dependence, neighbourhood solidarity and the EU-Jordan Compact: livelihood analysis of Syrian refugees in Greater Amman', BICC Working Paper, 4/19 (2019).

[14]Ann-Christin Wagner, ''Acts of "homing" in the Eastern Desert—How Syrian refugees make temporary homes in a village outside Zaatari Camp, Jordan', in *Home: Ethnographic Encounters*, ed. Johannes Lenhard and Farhan Samanani (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 176

[15]Jacobsen, 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas'; Phillip Marfleet, '"Forgotten", "Hidden": Predicaments of the Urban Refugee', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 24, no. 1 (2007): 36–45; Hoffstaedter and Koizumi, *Urban Refugees*; Martina Tazzioli, *The Making of Migration: The Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe's Borders* (SAGE Publications, 2019).

[16]Karen Jacobsen, 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 275; Gerhard Hoffstaedter and Koichi Koizumi, *Urban Refugees: Challenges in protection, services and policy* (London: Routledge, 2015).

areas, urban refugees in northern Jordan are securitized through the means of transport available to them and the routes required to get from one point to another. Urban refugees living in Mafraq's municipalities, such as Zaatari village, alongside inhabitants of the camp and Jordanians, require and depend on these routes to travel across Jordan, should they need. During the autumn months, harvesting olives and other seasonal produce is a vital source of income for many families. Security checks increase on the buses during this time and there is a heavier police presence at Mafraq station.[17] Urban refugee security, therefore, remains precarious as refugees and their movements are monitored as a consequence of geographies of transportation.

This article builds on ethnographic work in Jordan. The vignettes and corresponding analysis are based on my own observations during these journeys and draws on conversations and interviews with aid professionals, municipal workers, and Syrian and Jordanian residents of Amman and Zaatari village. It was during these exchanges that various geographical imaginaries of refugee-host settlements, and Zaatari village in particular, began to emerge. Interlocutors described these geographies as obscure and remote, creating a distinct perception of those who inhabit the area. In what ways did the GoJ's—often public—refugee governance connect to these discussions of geography and the precarity surrounding urban refugees? The bus journey was one which I took daily—it was my commute—ruptured by a violent encounter, which stayed with me as I tried to 'make sense' of what had happened. It prompted a reckoning in my fieldwork, providing an opportunity to explore the connectedness of space, movement and security, and examine how everyday encounters constitute subjects. The journey provided an opportunity to be reflexive and interrogate my own position as a white, Western researcher and student.[18] As the opening vignette exposes, my Jordanian friend assured me that the officer would not ask me for documentation because of my gender, while my whiteness and foreignness provided a further level of protection. My positionality provided a particular layer of security, not afforded to those I observed. This enabled me to feel, watch and listen to a vastly different set of experiences which had an effect on how interlocutors perceived me and how I perceived these encounters. While living in Amman, I was able to move safely through Jordan, and to travel through the systems of power I was interrogating, largely undisturbed.

Beginning the article with the violent encounter depicting the everyday security mechanisms refugees must navigate, the second vignette takes place at Raghadan station, a transportation hub on the outskirts of northeast Amman. I use this vignette to raise questions about methods, misinformation and the initial geographical obscurity surrounding Zaatari village as a refugee space. The article moves north to Mafraq station in the northeast, border governorate of Jordan. This vignette opens a broader analysis of the GOJ's securitization of urban refugees in Jordan. These governance strategies position refugees living outside of camps and their locations as insecure, thus requiring policies of visibility to ensure the socio-political and economic protection of the state. Public transport allows refugees to be channelled along particular routes in order to monitor and securitize them. Bus checks take place at specific sites along this road, compounding the

[17]Fieldnotes, October 2021.
[18]Wanda Vrasti, 'The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations', *Millennium Journal of International Relations* 37, no. 2 (2008): 279–301.

ways in which governance mechanisms filter into geographical imaginaries of the everyday. To explore this, I return to Damascus Highway and propose that the geographies and methods of transportation used by urban refugees influence the perceptions from aid workers and Amman residents, who often regard urban refugees as obscure and shrouded in insecurity. I structure the article through this journey to move and write in parallel with urban refugees and other residents making this journey. I do this for two reasons. First, this signifies how geographies of control unfold through different encounters in different places, and manifest in the practices of mundane routine.[19] The article explores how security and surveillance logics weave through rural displacement narratives, asserting particular imaginaries and perceptions onto geographies where urban refugees are concentrated. Second, taking inspiration from scholars invested in the narrative approach, storytelling 'draw[s] out the complex and ambiguous mutual constitution of selves with others, of present with past, of person with place'.[20] Writing in this way provides the creativity and space to 'pay attention to the flows and ripples of ordinary life'.[21] This approach depicts how a multiplicity of insecurities emerge when looking at everyday journeys and geographies of control rather than through ascribing a generalized vulnerability to, or threat of, refugees.

Methods of seeing (in)security

Raghadan bus station, Amman

I'm on a bus, but whether it is the bus I need is another question; one which I am finding surprisingly hard to answer. On the advice of interlocutors from Zaatari village, I've taken a yellow taxi from my home on a Sunday morning, around 7.30 am, and already the sun is burning through the open window onto the leather seats. In Arabic, I ask the driver about buses to Mafraq; 'no buses to Mafraq, I don't know', he replies assertively in English, before offering to drive north for an inflated sum. Unsure what I will find, we pull up on the side of a busy main road, and he points to an overpass where, on the other side, I see various food stalls selling breads, spices and fruit, and another selling shoes. On the outskirts of town, this does not look like a bus station. I walk through the alley of stands, following the direction of the crowd. Hidden from the road and behind the marketplace I finally see buses, mini-vans, coaches and taxis—and people everywhere. Commuters stride past me, men yell from behind their stands selling tickets and coffee, mini-buses beep one another out the way. Taxis line up to collect the neat rows of people seeking shade under awnings.

Initially, it looks like bedlam and I cannot find a sign saying 'Mafraq'. I wander, reading the script written on the side of the parked, white mini-buses. Worried I won't find the bus, finally, I see 'Mafraq' next to crates of rubbish and junk—old shoes, smashed up crockery and plastic. There are two older gentlemen sitting on the pavement next to the bus. Smoking roll-ups, feet carefully balanced over their sandal straps, one stands and nods to me, tucking in a stained

[19] Jonna Nyman, 'The Everyday Life of Security: Capturing Space, Practice, and Affect', *International Political Sociology* 15 (2021): 313–337.

[20] Jenny Edkins and others, 'Tales of Entanglement', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49, no. 3 (2021): 604; Aya Nassar, 'Where the dust settles: fieldwork, subjectivity and materiality in Cairo', Contemporary Social Science 13, no. 3–4 (2018): 412–428; Naeem Inayatullah, *Autobiographical international Relations: I, IR* (London: Routledge, 2011); Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'Writing as hope: Reflections on "The Politics of Exile"', *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 4 (2013): 374–361.

[21] Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations 'Exquisite Corpse'* (London: Routledge, 2013), xvii.

brown shirt into grey trousers far too short for his tall frame. He ushers me onto the bus. Stepping on, it's dark and musky, and my eyes take time to adjust. Sitting behind the driver are two young women, their book bags resting on their laps. We are the only passengers apart from a young man, cap over his face, asleep on the back row. I sit on the worn maroon fabric next to the window and peel back the curtain. Peeking out from behind the heavy, drawn fabric; people arrive at the station, march knowingly to the correct line; the taxis arranged into their different jibal across Amman.[22] *One in the front, two in the back—the speed and efficiently of the whole process is flawless. It is perfectly choregraphed, an organized chaos of confident feet, opening doors and jerking tires. Young men in suits carry lunch in plastic bags, well-dressed women in muted tones fan themselves, children scurry behind grandparents, while students overloaded with giant backpacks laugh in huddled groups. No taxi is stationary for longer than five minutes.*

After an hour, around 9 am, it's confirmed by the driver that this is the Zarqa/Mafraq bus. The bus is full as people perch uncomfortably on the stairs beside the out-of-use toilet. Around a third of the bus is filled with students: young women in nursing scrubs or smart clothes, or men cradling textbooks. The rest are predominantly young men, most casually dressed in jeans and t-shirts, illuminated faces staring at phone screens. Jolting into action, we pull away from the station straight into oncoming traffic on the dual carriageway.[23]

In the days leading up to this journey, I had been in touch with various contacts living in Zaatari village, alongside humanitarian interlocutors working in the area, and had asked their advice about the best public transport routes between Amman and Mafraq. I had initially planned on going to one of the four main bus stations in Amman, which are frequented by JETT buses. A professional company widely used across Jordan, the buses are air conditioned, and your pre-booked seat departs strictly to a set time. However, through these conversations, I became aware that the main bus stations in the capital do not provide transport to Mafraq. Over WhatsApp, friends and I discussed different stations in Amman, and like many others, Mohammad, a Jordanian resident of Zaatari, had replied 'I rarely use the bus, maybe it's Tabarbour station,[24] or maybe go to Zarqa first and change'.[25] On the advice of his colleague, Mohammad later informed me that there is a bus 'with no timetable, but they leave maybe from 7 am from Raghadan to Mafraq'.[26] This experience initially left me feeling as though there was an obscurity surrounding northeast Jordan which began with the absence of travel knowledge and the lack of transportation infrastructure between Mafraq and Amman. Raghadan station's organized taxi system did not extend to Mafraq and information about this route was largely omitted from online sources. I wanted to understand the effect Mafraq's geography—and by extension Zaatari village—had on the various geographical imaginaries which emerged from these conversations and observations, and whether these perceptions positioned urban refugee movement as precarious.

Raghadan bus station is hidden from the main road, resembling a market more than a transportation hub, with no signs or visual indications of its purpose. The station is what Renata Summa asserts as an 'entrance point to understand the everyday enactment of

[22] *Jabal*, meaning mountain in Arabic, refers here to the various districts in Amman. Amman is made up of seven *mountains* (plural *jibal)*, and this geographical distinction is used by the taxi system.
[23] Fieldnotes, June 2021.
[24] A bus station in the north of Amman, not used by JETT buses.
[25] Names have been changed to protect confidentiality. Mohammad, Zaatari village resident, WhatsApp, June 2021.
[26] Ibid.

boundaries': the only public gateway to travel northeast, and the first 'reference point' to getting to Mafraq or Zaatari.[27] As I came to discover, knowledge of this route was not easily accessible, but required multiple conversations between friends in Amman, Irbid and the Mafraq Governorate, who took the time to check with those who had experience of this journey. Once at the bus station, information about the Mafraq bus was vague, as I walked between the rows of parked vehicles reading the various destinations. Furthermore, public buses in Jordan have no official timetable but leave when they are full. This means you can wait five minutes or more than an hour, depending on the popularity or remoteness of your destination, or whether it is a quiet time of day. Having no tourist value and little economic identity, the Mafraq bus is rare, and waiting more than an hour is common practice. For that reason, I was told somewhat vaguely by village resident, Abu Ahmed, to 'leave a lot of time'.[28] The urban area of Mafraq, despite being a city, is marginal at best in the daily transport operations of Amman, which is reflected in the public transportation system. Travel is cheap yet unreliable—the driver first asked for 1.40 dinars (approximately £1.50) yet later, when I became a regular user, this decreased to 75 cents. Poor Jordanians and students attending the northern universities constitute a significant proportion of those who travel these longer distances by public bus. Additional groups comprise Syrians and other migrant labourers, many of whom hold precarious employment. The buses are old and run-down; the daily grind shown through worn-out tires and speckled paint.

My initial experience of uncertainty surrounding Raghadan bus station came from being new to the setting but the overall situation hints at a general sense of uncertainty; about the departure time and location, price, and whether this was the correct bus, as depicted by the multiple conversations between interlocutors and myself. Thus, while my experience denotes a particular uncertainty around unfamiliar travel, it sparks a broader reflection on how insecurity as precarity emerges and is channelled through the station, journey, and road. Experiencing these spaces of the journey are important as they connect to various insecurities that emerge as a consequence of movement in ordinary living. The uncertainty around the station, which bus to board and the departure time builds a constellation of precarity that urban refugees must navigate. These spaces develop into sites of insecurity, which have become entrenched in refugee governance and, as I will show, this has important repercussions for how 'imagined geographies' transpire.

Rather than impose a binary logic comparing Amman and Zaatari village, to see the capital in opposition to a rural settlement, I emphasize the journey to stress that these elements are constantly intersecting. In observing the travel experiences of refugees returning north, I reposition Zaatari village at the centre of analysis. Not as a peripheral boundary or conceptually removed location, but rather a space that challenges governing logics. The GoJ invited the UNHCR to construct the adjacent Zaatari camp to 'provide security' for the incoming Syrian population and strategically 'raise the profile of, and funds for, Syrian refugees on its territory'.[29] Despite pressure from the GoJ to enter the camp, 69% of Syrians living in Zaatari village refused the camp and self-settled in the

[27] Summa, *Everyday Boundaries, Borders and Post Conflict Societies—Critical Security Studies in the Global South* (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020), 101.
[28] Abu Ahmed, Zaatari village resident, WhatsApp, June 2021.
[29] Ali Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response: The "Many Hands" of the Jordanian state', *Mediterranean Politics* (2021): 1; Lewis Turner, 'Explaining the (Non-)Encampment of Syrian Refugees: Security, Class and the Labour Market in Lebanon and Jordan', *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 387.

village due to specific ties to extended family or tribal networks, or pre-war economic connections.[30] Many of the Syrians I spoke with felt a strong affinity with the Mafraq Governorate, yet became entangled in refugee governance due to the context of displacement. Furthermore, highlighting this route provides perspective on the most well-travelled route undertaken by humanitarian actors, security personnel and workers employed in the area. As the metropole, Amman accommodates NGO headquarters and regional offices that coordinate operational logistics that filter into spaces such as Zaatari. Driving along this central highway connecting south to north, the road symbolizes a commute for some, but also signifies a supply chain, a lifeline, or a precarious passage for different residents of Jordan. Movement here is not a passive undertaking; the tarmac is co-constituted by the drivers and passengers of cars, lorries and buses whizzing along their potholed course. As identified in the opening encounter, the road becomes an emblem of Jordan's security logics. Through police checks and identification inspections, bodies are deemed 'irregular' and are specifically targeted in remote intersections along the 60 km stretch of motorway.

By the beginning of my fieldwork, I had completed extensive desk research analysing the GoJ's policies towards refugees, historicizing these encounters within other refugee movements since the 1940s, alongside analysis of (inter)national humanitarian reports documenting Jordan's formal refugee camps and urban settlements effected by displacement. During my fieldwork, I interviewed municipal employees, UNHCR and aid agency personnel in various departments, alongside residents of Zaatari village, Irbid and Amman.[31] Each was attuned to the situation and the various hardships present; their work or spaces of living intertwined daily with such areas. Jordan is no stranger to academic researchers or (inter)national aid workers, most of whom are concentrated in Amman. Despite this, when explaining my research, individuals often seemed bemused as to why I would study such a seemingly obscure settlement, with many Jordanians continuously informing me about the camp without mentioning the neighbouring village. During informal social occasions with friends and interlocutors, a perception of Zaatari village and Mafraq began to be formed, made up of a multifaceted web of hearsay, misinformation, and policy initiatives. The majority of humanitarians working 'on'/'at'/'with'/'in'[32] the Mafraq Governorate live in Amman and travel in private cars north to undertake field visits. Leaving an office and travelling to the field is, as Lisa Smirl argues, a 'highly structured, codified, and predictable 'rite of passage' and . . . has very little to do with 'the local' but rather is focused almost exclusively on 'the international'.[33] In travelling along the highway, the road becomes the site where 'global politics materializes' and demonstrates how a politics of (in)security relates to different bodies.[34] My European passport provided a distinct privilege allowing me to move freely and without fear across locations, despite police checks. However, the public bus remains a much relied upon

[30]Acting for Change International, 'Multi-sector Needs Assessment Report, Zaatari Village', https://www.actingforchangeinternational.org/_files/ugd/3bd71f_d362b50a06ad44f6be6 2a04a955ecdf8.pdf.

[31]Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Arabic, where the native language of participants was Arabic, English, French or German.

[32]Aid workers referred to their engagement with the 'field site' – both the camp and the urban environment—in various vernaculars, reflecting a linguistic power dynamic in how they understood their interactions.

[33]Smirl, 'The State we are(n't) in: Liminal subjectivity in aid worker autobiographies', in *Statebuilding and State-Formation: The Political Sociology of Intervention*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (London: Routledge, 2012), 231.

[34]Elisa Pascucci, 'The local labour building the international community: Precarious work within humanitarian spaces', *EPA: Economy and Space* 51, no. 3 (2019): 743–760.

route that channels refugees along a single road, allowing surveillance and identification practices to occur with ease.

Following my own journey on the road, and observing these regular practices, I came to understand that experiences of (in)security emerge through the messy textures of everyday life.[35] Methodologically, I had to move through these spaces to explore how (in) security arose as an embodied practice enmeshed in state policy and territorial geographies.[36] In doing so, I build on literature combining mobility and (urban)ethnography, which questions how transport and our modes of moving affect our research.[37] This literature operates as both a tangible method and a lens through which to view the mobility paradigm in an urban context through attention to walking,[38] driving[39] and cycling.[40] Each encourages a thoughtfulness about what is produced when researchers draw on embodied methodologies; to observe the complexities of movement as a political act—rather than a random occurrence—and occupy similar patterns of movement. This approach provides a space to understand how refugee mobility is a particular strategy of identity building in displacement, which portrays non-camp locations, such as a public bus, as 'emerging spaces of refugee governance'.[41] Exploring these experiences allows us to see how subjects navigate such constructions in daily life. This method pushed my own ethical approach to think with, and respond to, how individuals react to their location and the systems of power they become entangled in.[42] Telling the story of 'seeing' (in)security opened an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of (in)security encounters and how worlds are experienced differently, not to capture any sort of authenticity,[43] but to re-centre those whose lives are channelled, and identities constituted, through such systems.

(In)security as precarity in living cannot be 'found', but rather emerges in ordinary life. One has to wait: to experience, feel, move and listen through spaces. On this public bus—undertaking a routine journey—Syrian men travelling without the required documentation are under threat of being caught by authorities. The scene epitomizes the impossibility of bifurcating between ordinary and extraordinary,[44] and emphasizes how security logics are wrapped in the social relations and practices which make up mundane life. For Jordanians or those who can prove their legal status, threat, unease or feelings of insecurity may come from these 'criminalised' bodies—fears that they could take

[35]Vicki Squire, 'Attuning to Mess', in *Research Methods*, 37–41.
[36]Angharad Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).
[37]Leonie S. Newhouse, 'Footing it, or why I walk', *African Geographical Review* 31, no. 1 (2013): 67–71; Anita Fábos, 'Microbuses and Mobile Homemaking in Exile: Sudanese Visiting Strategies in Cairo', *Refuge* 31, no. 1 (2015): 55–66.
[38]James Evans and Phil Jones, 'The walking interview: Methodology, mobility and place', *Applied Geography* 31 (2011): 849–858; Newhouse, 'Footing it'; Olivia Mason, 'Walking the line: lines, embodiment and movement on the Jordan Trail', *Cultural Geographies* 27, no. 3 (2019): 395–414; Robin James Smith and Tom Hall, 'Pedestrian circulations: urban ethnography, the mobilities paradigm and outreach work', *Mobilities* 11, no. 4 (2016): 498–508; Jennie Middleton, 'The socialites of everyday urban walking and the "right to the city"', *Urban Studies* 55, no. 2 (2018): 296–315.
[39]Peter Merriman, 'Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4 (2004): 145–167; Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'The City and the Car', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 4 (2000): 737–757; Nigel Thrift, 'Driving in the City', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4 (2004): 41–59.
[40]Justin Spinney, 'Cycling the City: Movement, Meaning and Method', *Geography Compass* 3, no. 2 (2009): 817–835.
[41]Elisa Pascucci, 'Transnational disruptions: materialities and temporalities of transnational citizenship among Somali refugees in Cairo', *Global Networks* 16, no. 3 (2016): 326–343: 328; Fábos, 'Microbuses and Mobile Homemaking'.
[42]Rosemary E. Shinko, 'Theorizing the body in IR', in *Research Methods*, 162–164.
[43]Dauphinee, 'Writing as hope', 348.
[44]Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2020), 15.

another's job, or disrupt their commute, or perhaps, indicate another's ambiguous status. To trace where these perceptions may arise from, in the following section, I describe the GoJ's refugee response plan which positions urban refugees within securitizing frameworks. The analysis emphasizes how monitoring urban refugee movement has become a central feature of the state's security policy, and thus requires urban refugees to become visible. Targeting refugee movement towards the geographies where they reside—in this case the Mafraq Governorate—emphasizes the precarity to be found in everyday encounters which constitute the urban refugee as insecure.

Policies of control: securitizing urban refugees

Mafraq bus station, Mafraq

The bus is a little more than half full now. We slide left at the intersection and into the outskirts of Mafraq city—a right turn would take you to Iraq while journeying north onto the overpass would take you to the Syrian border, around 20 km away. The roadside begins to reveal dusty settlements of around 15 to 20 tents, with small, barefoot children running between the ropes anchoring these tents to the ground. Further east, we make a left turn, announcing our arrival in 'MAFRA' in large, white, metal letters—the Q has toppled over.

Mafraq station resembles a busy car park, filled with mini-vans revving, haphazardly parked across neatly drawn, yet completely ignored, white lines on worn tarmac. The station is quiet in the mid-morning heat as passengers step off and readjust their vision after an hour in darkness. Outside the doors of the bus, the air is filled with yelling men and beeping horns. These various characters greet passengers, calling out the names of potential destinations: Amman, Zarqa, Irbid or mukhayam (camp). While some of my fellow commuters board a second bus, others disappear into vans or parked cars, or fade into the side streets, joining the crowds walking briskly on the main road.

As a white, foreign female alone in the station, I attract a lot of attention. People ask me where I want to go, instinctively offering to take me to the camp; each assuming this is my final destination. I take a seat on a dusty, splinted bench in the middle of the station where another family are seated, and wait for my friend to collect me, observing the bustle. A police car is parked on the outer edge of the station wall. The windows are rolled down as two officers survey the area calmly. This is a routine, not an exception. It's quieter than Raghadan, and people are dressed in casual wear—trainers, jeans and caps instead of suits or trousers. The stalls bordering the station are mostly closed, only two selling water and coffee seemed to have survived. Three small children approach, led by a teenage girl who asks for money—much to my surprise the youngest is wearing a MAGA red cap.[45]

Mafraq bus station is located in the centre of the city, running parallel to the main road of shops and restaurants. A city bordering Syria, since 2011 Mafraq has undergone immense change with the arrival of Syrians and humanitarian infrastructure.[46] At the station, there are no obvious signs of (I)NGO offices or their employees and, I assume, based on numerous accounts, that most staff would have private or rental cars and travel directly to their destination, rather than risk the unreliable public buses. Close to the Mafraq intersection as you enter the city, is an old, faded sign directing people to the

[45]Fieldnotes, June 2021.
[46]Ann-Christin Wagner, 'Giving Aid Inside the Home', *Migration and Society: Advances in Research* 1 (2018): 36–50.

UNHCR Mafraq office, but visual reminders of an international presence remain thin. While there is little evidence of aid agencies at the station, there is a distinct police presence. Officers here could be found at various times of the day, and would largely remain seated in their cars on the outskirts of the station. Rarely would they approach the buses. Being seen was deemed enough to secure this powerplay. With the Mafraq Governorate home to Zaatari camp and the Jaber-Nassib border crossing between Syria and Jordan, securitization efforts throughout the northeast are highly visible.[47] With approximately 85,000 Syrians self-settling in the Mafraq Governorate, the second-largest concentration of Syrian refugees in Jordan, after Amman, on occasion, disputes between Jordanians and Syrians have erupted into violence, including street protests or damage to buildings and businesses where Syrians reside or work.[48] Such events encouraged a security presence in the area, and, as the vignette depicts, this includes public areas such as the bus station. This demonstrates an explicit link between urban refugee movement and state operations which position the lives of urban refugees in Mafraq as a security issue.

Mafraq has a long history as a military base, with British forces occupying the area with permanent units until the mid-1990s.[49] It is now heavily fortified by Hashemite forces, border guards and Syrian Refugees Affairs Directorate (SRAD) officials. Compounding this army presence are the closely connected local police, tasked with 'enhancing community engagement'.[50] The Jordanian army and local police forces concentrated in the northeast continue to be a major employer of the region's tribal communities, connecting a 'strong presence in the security and military apparatuses' to the rural settlements surrounding Mafraq.[51] Classified as a 'citizen-orientated service',[52] the police work with tribal leaders to settle problems between Jordanians, and between Syrians and Jordanians—most of whom are familiar with these processes due to their shared kinship. However, 'social capital', of which Syrians have little, 'plays a role in the negotiated outcomes of tribal settlements' leaving refugees vulnerable to further exploitation.[53] Through social, kinship and employment ties, such mechanisms have embedded the police in rural communities, leaving potential victims of abuse or mistreatment living in (semi-)urban spaces little room to seek help. Syrian refugees, who lack social clout, are among the victims. It is therefore not surprising that they try to avoid the police altogether, as I was told by several interviewees.[54]

[47]Over the past decade, the Jaber border crossing between Jordan and Syria has closed on several occasions due to smuggling, fears of cross-border violence due to the Syrian war, an increase in refugee movement and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Reopened in 2021, it remains a key site for the Jordanian security forces (Aron Lund, 'What Jordan's Reopened Border Will Mean for Syria', *The New Humanitarian*, September 11, 2017, https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/community/2017/09/11/what-jordans-reopened-border-will-mean-for-syria (accessed December 4, 2022).

[48]UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal (2023) https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36 (accessed 12 January 2023); Mercy Corps, 'Mapping of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq and Ramtha, Jordan' (2013) https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/38301 (accessed 7 October 2020).

[49]Fieldnotes, October 2021.

[50]Jessica Watkins, 'Policing and Protection for Syrian Refugees in Jordan', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77511.

[51]Paivi Miettunen and Mohammed Shunnaq, 'Tribal Networks and Informal Adaptive Mechanisms of Syrian Refugees. The case of the Bani Khalid Tribe in Jordan, Syrian and Lebanon', Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (American University of Beirut, 2020): 23, 10.

[52]Watkins, 'Policing and Protection'.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Fieldnotes, November, 2021.

The presence of police on public buses and in Mafraq's bus station, therefore, is just one part of the GoJ's response to Syrian refugees. There is considerable literature documenting Jordan's refugee response; strategies underpinned, to varying degrees, by narratives of security. These analytically rich texts have covered the policies of encampment,[55] policy legacies and the history of refugee populations,[56] the labour market,[57] and pre-existing labour routes,[58] alongside state integration, protection and border control mechanisms.[59] Despite the different starting points of analysis, it is widely acknowledged that Jordan's refugee response since 2012 'is shaped by a security agenda—but not one understood narrowly in relation to violence and armed conflict'.[60] In framing the arrival of Syrian refugees as a security problem, the GoJ facilitated encampment policies and severe economic restrictions, in order to quell an already discontented Jordanian workforce and justify much-needed international funding.[61] Together, these policies were believed to discourage long-term residency in Jordan, where a permanent Syrian presence was viewed as a 'destabilizer of Jordan's demographic balance and therefore of Hashemite rule'.[62] Syrians, as 'a politically active native-Arabic speaking population' were deemed by SRAD as a 'security risk' and an 'economically competitive' entity.[63] While the Kingdom of Jordan was initially praised for its positive and timely response regarding Syrians in 2012, after the initial influx, the GoJ 'restricted access' and 'actively prevented' certain groups from entering the country, including 'unaccompanied male youth'.[64] Policy towards Syrians, especially young men, has long embedded a security agenda, subsequently justifying military and police intervention.

As a result, to keep 'Trans-Jordanians' loyal to the Kingdom—many of whom work in the public sector, including the army or police—strategies to control, monitor or stifle Syrian movement and dissuade them from permanent residency had to be visible and co-ordinate, to some extent, with international humanitarian objectives. By challenging urban refugees' freedom to move, work and settle, mechanisms of state governance increase the precarity of urban refugees. Government officials, including the King, made clear in public forums that Syrians were exacerbating already stretched infrastructure and burdening a problematic economy.[65] It was not, therefore, unexpected when a variety of 'security apparatus', including 'military, police, and intelligence institutions and their material equipment' were utilized in Jordan's governance policies towards Syrian movement, focused, in part, on the homebound journeys travelled by refugees.[66] Urban

[55]Turner, 'Explaining the (Non-)Encampment'; Hoffman, 'Humanitarian security'; Gatter, 'Restoring childhood'.
[56]Katharina Lenner, '"Biting Our tongues": Policy Legacies and Memories in the Making of the Syrian Refugee Response in Jordan', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39 (2020): 273–298; Dawn Chatty, 'The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Understanding Perceptions and Aspirations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey', *Global Policy* 8, no. 1 (2017): 25–32.
[57]Katharina Lenner and Lewis Turner, 'Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labour Market in Jordan', *Middle East Critique* 28, no.1 (2018): 65–95.
[58]Lucas Oesch', Mobility as a solution', *Forced Migration Review: The Syrian crisis, displacement and protection* 47 (2014); Zuntz, 'Refugees' Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances'.
[59]Zeynep Şahin Mencütek, *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East* (London: Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2019); Luigi Achilli, 'Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Reality Check', Migration Policy Centre, EUI (2015); Luigi Achilli, Nasser Yassin and M. Murat Erdogan, 'Neighbouring Host-Countries' Policies for Syrian Refugees: The cases of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey', European Institute of the Mediterranean (January, 2017).
[60]Ali Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response', 4.
[61]Turner, 'Explaining the (Non-)Encampment'.
[62]Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response', 5.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Chatty, 'The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster', 29.
[65]Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response'.
[66]Kaldor & Selchow, 2015 in Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response': 4.

refugees self-settling in the Mafraq Governorate posed a somewhat different challenge to the UNHCR's and GoJ's joint strategy of encampment.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) regulates urban refugee populations, employing local police stations in Mafraq to settle criminal matters.[67] Urban refugees, however, are 'keen to avoid the police wherever possible', with trust between the two entities considered harder to facilitate in urban environments, where police are viewed as 'law enforcers'.[68] As one UNHCR interviewee relayed, urban refugees, although understood to 'have more freedom of movement', are more susceptible to frictions with the law due to their 'vague status as urban residents'.[69] For example, some refugees may not be registered with the UNHCR or local police, may not have updated their formal details, or hold forged documents. Others may be working illegally without a permit; a common issue when most Syrian refugees in Jordan live in poverty.[70] If a Syrian refugee left the camp illegally to live in an urban area, this would prohibit their access to the required identification card essential to gain a work permit. Furthermore, residing outside camp walls without authorization would make them 'ineligible for monthly cash grants from UN agencies', therefore risking plunging families further below the poverty line.[71] Those who leave the camp illegally, without the correct paperwork,[72] but who are unable to register as asylum seekers,[73] could be arrested, transferred to another camp or deported to Syria.[74] Urban refugees are forced to hide between the cracks of urban life yet are often compelled to make journeys that are unsafe and precarious for economic reasons, as depicted in the opening vignette. Meanwhile, 'Legal irregularities make refugees vulnerable to illegal exploitation and abuse', while becoming visible to authorities leaves many at risk, with fears of arrest, deportation or abuse.[75]

The GoJ, with the support of international aid agencies, has tried to visibilise urban refugees through campaigns to increase work permits for Syrians in 2016[76] and, later in 2018, offering 'amnesty' to unregistered Syrians. On the one hand, such 'visibility initiatives' were undertaken to ensure financial support from international agencies and donors.[77] Here, urban refugees were considered 'concerned populations' who needed to be taken care of by the 'protection regime'.[78] On the other, Syrian bodies were conceptualized as the potentially criminal 'other', in order to justify the regulation of their bodies through state and donor recognition, overseen by police forces. This paradox is portrayed by Philip Marfleet who contends that many urban refugees are simultaneously 'forgotten' by and 'hidden' to state authorities and aid organizations as well as hyper-visible in campaigns of exclusion.[79]

[67]Watkins, 'Policing and Protection'.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Online interview with UNHCR employee, January 2021.
[70]Watkins, 'Policing and Protection'; Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Jordan: Step Forward, Step Back for Urban Refugees' (2018) https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/25/jordan-step-forward-step-back-urban-refugees.
[71]HRW, 'Jordan: Step Forward, Step Back'.
[72]From 2015, camp residents require a vacation pass to leave legally.
[73]This could be due to not having all or any official documents, or fraudulent documents.
[74]HRW, 'Jordan: Step Forward, Step Back'.
[75]Ibid.
[76]Sarah Tobin and Maisam Alahmed, 'Beyond the work permit quotas. Corruption and other barriers to labour integration for Syrian refugees in Jordan', Anti-Corruption Resource Centre U4 Issue (2019): 4.
[77]Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response': 4.
[78]Lenner, '"Biting Our tongues"': 283, 279.
[79]Marfleet, '"Forgotten", "Hidden"': 36.

To receive labor protections and gain access to the job market, Syrian refugees require an asylum seeker certificate, acquired upon registration with the UNHCR, and a MoI service card, granted by the GoJ. Together they provide 'a *de facto* recognition of refugee status'.[80] Meanwhile, the 2018 'amnesty' offered by the GoJ sought to formalize refugee residencies outside its camps and 'regularize the status' of refugees, including those living in urban spaces at risk of arrest for illegally leaving the camp without documentation.[81] By late 2018, approximately 30,000 Syrians had registered with the UNHCR, while the number of work permits allocated continued to rise.[82] While this regularization scheme was welcomed by the UNHCR, it is still widely acknowledged that distrust in authorities, including a lack of trust in police, led many urban-living Syrians to remain undocumented.[83] As the opening vignette observed, many of those targeted for arrest were working-aged men, often fathers, uncles or brothers considered the breadwinners within the family home.[84] With distrust enduring, the motivations behind the policy remain clear—to visibilise urban refugee populations and incorporate them into securitization logics.[85]

Officializing the status of Syrians living in urban contexts is an important channel to 'make visible' urban refugees in everyday spaces. These mechanisms of population control are implemented by (inter)national organizations, alongside what Ali refers to as the 'many hands' of the Jordanian state.[86] Traffic police, under the control of the Public Security Directorate (PSD), station guards and aid agencies, together secure 'the political status quo' underpinning the Jordanian state.[87] Policies of control generate surveillance mechanisms, identification checks and violent public encounters, and represent part of the matrix of making visible security logics against a population—predominantly young, working aged men—and a geography—a bus travelling from the capital to northern Jordan. As the next section will show, these associations between security policy, precarity and the urban refugee intensify conceptualizations of the urban Syrian 'other' living in the north as a burden on the state, a potential threat to society and a body engaging in potentially illegal activity.

Geographical imaginaries of Zaatari village: constituting urban refugees

Damascus highway, Mafraq Governorate

Following the little blue dot as it shifts north on Google Maps, the drive takes less time than I imagined. The obscurity of Raghadan station and the conversations with friends had led me to believe I was going somewhere distant, somewhere ambiguous. Those trying to find sleep grumble when I pull away the curtain, so we sit in the dark—inside our portable bubble. We

[80]Alexander C. Burlin and Ruba Ahmad, 'Recognition beyond RSD: Civil and legal documentation for Syrians refugees in Jordan', *Refugee Law Initiative* (2020) https://rli.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2020/09/25/recognition-beyond-rsd-civil-and-legal-documentation-for-syrian-refugees-in-jordan/.
[81]HRW, 'Jordan: Step Forward, Step Back'.
[82]Watkins, 'Policing and Protection'.
[83]Ibid; Fieldnotes, September 2021.
[84]HRW, 'Jordan: Step Forward, Step Back..
[85]Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response'.
[86]Ibid.
[87]Ibid., 2.

stop at Zarqa University, where a number of young, bleary-eyed students get off the bus, and we continue along the highway.

Past Zarqa I peep behind the drapes to see a changed terrain. The urbanized cityscape has gone, replaced by a backdrop unfolding for miles. The brown-beige flatness gives way to the occasional factory, farm or petrol station. The sun clings to everything below, the landscape charmed by pockets of grassy verges or rugged rocks. Buildings are illuminated by the morning glow, but I see few people. Signs of life emerge from settlements nestled in the distance. The potholed road ruptures the soothing hum of cars outside and the recent pop sensation—'Fady Shewaya' – played on repeat somewhere at the back of the bus. These moments of calm float over me as I watch soil and debris surface through dust clouds, blinking to protect my eyes from the white blaze above. As we move north, the flat arid land hugs the highway and the road becomes quieter; the cars more derelict. In the distance to my right, I observe what I assume is a city. Moving the mobile map more closely, I realise this is Zaatari camp, just visible from the main road north. Now the fourth largest city in Jordan, I can see the white tops of caravans and an endless, tangled web of wires above the buildings. It sits alone in its surroundings, yet its vast size hints at a dynamism found in the sprawling spaces of life.

The arrest of the young Syrian man following the identification check on the bus took place on this stretch of highway, after leaving Amman and having passed the next major city of Zarqa. The police checks do not happen in urban or rural residential or populated spaces, but take place in the in-between. The checks symbolically mark the territory of secure/insecure: leaving Zarqa's Governorate and entering the Mafraq Governorate. Taking place at these certain intervals along the highway, the landscape either side is barren. There is no place to hide or escape, no excuses to be made. The parched surroundings and the randomness of the stop's location all echo a precarity and unsureness. Why did these checks take place here, only on buses arriving to Mafraq? What does this tell us about the geographies where urban refugees are concentrated?[88]

Damascus highway connects north to south and is the road most used by aid agency workers, security personnel, or any individual needing to travel the length of the northern region. Mafraq—and its neighbour, Zaatari village—is around an hour's drive north. On leaving Amman, passengers quickly find themselves on the margins of a desert landscape. Relaying these encounters with the police, interlocutors speculated that the checks take place here as this site is isolated, exacerbating the urban refugee as marginal, and police can wait for people to return to families, the camp and their home, meaning the activity has taken place and evidence of wrongdoing can be brought forward more easily.[89] Identification checks and arrests could be made at Raghadan or Mafraq bus station. Yet, in waiting for the bus to pass into the Mafraq Governorate and stopping the bus on an isolated section of road, compounds refugee geographies and the transport required as one of uncertainty and precarity. The 'many hands' of the Jordanian state know urban refugees require this pathway, so to halt the buses here is a purposeful decision which builds precarity into the public life of urban refugees and others on the bus.[90] The campaigns to increase work permits and provide amnesty—those designed to visibilise

[88]Fieldnotes, August 2021.
[89]Fieldnotes, October 2021.
[90]Ali, 'Disaggregating Jordan's Syrian refugee response'.

urban refugees—are thus accompanied by a secondary response: regular police identification checks on buses and police surveillance at transport hubs. The link between security, movement and visibility in the geographies where urban refugees reside is a distinct strategy of control by the GoJ. These tactics demonstrate how urban refugee security policy filters into the daily lives of refugees on-the-move, to create uncertainty and insecurity in seemingly banal spaces. These public forms of surveillance, inspection and criminalization do something specific to the perception of Syrian urban refugees and the geographies where these refugees are most concentrated.

Therefore, while surveillance and police identification checks constitute an explicit set of insecurities, the arid landscape and unpopulated scenes which the bus moves through operates as an important tool in creating geographical imaginaries which shape urban refugee precarity.

Conceptualizations of Zaatari village, and northern Jordan more broadly, are influenced by, and influencing of, mechanisms of state and international humanitarian governance, alongside the transport infrastructure. The geography, road and the everyday encounters, such as bus checks during journeys, impress a spatial obscurity. The road becomes 'a space of refugee politics' through this 'ensemble of authorities, legalizations and claims', made by those who use the road and those who seek to secure it.[91] Space 'is predominantly perceived in the form of stereotyped images which circulate through the dominant culture-shaping media and become actualized through in situ experiences'.[92] Thus, while forms of refugee control are often centred in spaces considered marginal, remote and exterior, 'detached from the territorial framing of the nation-state'[93] – for example, detention centres, border-holding facilities, or refugee camps[94] – this encounter is a form of authority and control which unfolds in the community. Observing encounters of this type in public serves to remind communities of 'refugeeness' and normalizes such exclusionary and violent behaviors as part of everyday life. Insecurity, therefore, is 'built into structure and as part of social orders that produce precarity'.[95] These actions reinscribe dangerous 'administrative categories' produced by the state which are fundamental to 'shaping perceptions of social worth and notions of threat'.[96] If refugees residing in camps are viewed as 'controlled populations', then their urban refugee counterparts are viewed as 'problematic', 'illegalised people', where state security measures are required in the ordinary spaces of daily life.[97]

Consequently, both the processes of surveillance and control, and Jordan's geographical makeup and spatialization of its refugee population play an important role in constituting urban refugee precarity. On arrival in Jordan in June 2021, I informally discussed my research with Jordanian residents, opening space for a variety of reactions and perceptions about the 'field site'. These conversations revealed important connections between the GoJ's refugee response, and the politics of security, movement and

[91]Jonathan Darling, 'Forced Migration and the city: Irregularity, informality, and the politics of presence', *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 2 (2017): 178–179.
[92]Stavros, *Common Space*: 185.
[93]Darling, 'Forced Migration and the city':179.
[94]See Hoffman, 'Humanitarian security'.
[95]Kirsti Stuvøy, Jutta Bakonyi and Peter Chonka, 'Precarious spaces and violent site effects: experiences from Hargeisa's urban margins', Conflict, Security & Development 21, no. 2 (2021): 153.
[96]Darling, 'Forced Migration and the city':179.
[97]Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis S. Tsianos, 'After citizenship: autonomy of migration, organisational ontology and mobile common', *Citizenship Studies* 17, no.2 (2013): 180.

migration more broadly. My impression was that many residents, based in Irbid, Amman or the cities further south, did not want to be associated with experiences in the north, or with Syrian migration in general. Discussing the situation disrupted the neat, imagined boundaries between themselves and such topics, perceiving Zaatari village and the Mafraq Governorate as far away from urban life, and, by extension, Syrian refugees as far away from their everyday lives. Concerned that I would not take in the 'right' Jordan they experienced and outwardly portrayed, several residents appeared disappointed or worried that in some way I would view their country only through the lens of migration and refugee struggle. The spaces where refugees resided were inherently different, the distant landscape transformed to a browning dust, and there collided an understanding that the area was unsafe or insecure. The reactions I experienced depict how some in the capital viewed Syrian migration in the north and the ensuing poverty as the darker undercurrents of society they did not want Jordan to be known for.

The physical distance maintained by the road, despite being an hour's journey, allows for an admitted ignorance where 'problems' *there* are unrelated to *here* in Amman.[98] Put into perspective, the average waiting time for a public bus in Amman during peak hours is 25 minutes, with commuters accustomed to extensive wait times, gridlock traffic and long journeys.[99] Many public transport users would not find a one-hour journey unusual, and as the vignette describes, I found the drive-time quicker than expected. Not only was this space understood as physically far removed, but the area had gained the perspective that it had its own micro-culture—dialect, customs and lifestyle. Northeast Jordan is deemed by many as a remote, dusty space occupied by Bedouin people. The Bedawi dialect spoken in the north is 'hard to understand, even for us'.[100] Through informal chats with Jordanian friends, an understanding ensued that the accent was thick and somewhat 'backward' from the clearer dialect spoken in Amman: 'My mum is from the Syrian countryside and still doesn't understand *them*', one interlocutor exclaimed.[101] From young students to shop workers to landlords, many Amman residents did not equate the lived experiences in northern Jordan, to *their* Jordan. Of course, many were aware of Zaatari camp and the mass movement of Syrians over the border, they were aware of the ongoing violence in Syria, and they too experienced many of the economic strains placed on Jordanian society due to a swelling population; but often, they viewed this as something entirely separate from their lives. Northeast Jordan has become detached in the Ammani imagination; a separate entity and disconnected space from the Jordan they live and work in. This distance cultivated a relationship with, or imagination of the north, becoming a space engulfed in insecurity, and those living in this space, such as Syrian urban refugees, also imagined as insecure; their lives dictated by precarious employment, police encounters and rugged terrains.

While some Jordanian residents position the village as 'the other' to the capital, based on ideas of a distinct culture and landscape, or indeed from witnessing security checks, many of the aid workers I spoke with had similar perceptions of Zaatari village. Urban refugees were constituted through the obscurity of geography and aid employees

[98]Fieldnotes, June 2021.
[99]Amir Shtayat and others, 'Waiting Time of Public Transport Passengers in Jordan: Magnitude and Cost', *The Open Transportation Journal* 13 (2019): 232.
[100]Ibid.
[101]Ibid.

constructed the village through its physical location—often as 'the other' to the camp—and the type of transport required for access—nearly always private cars, and often 4 × 4 trucks. Referring to the village, one humanitarian worker described Zaatari village as

> quite a merciless sort of place because it's a very dry plateau between the highlands of northern Jordan and southern Syria. It's very hot in summer and it's blistering cold in winter. It's very windy, there isn't really any shade. There isn't much vegetation. It's kind of a bit shrubby so it's good for grazing, for animal grazing. But the only trees that you'd find in the village are trees like olive trees that have been planted and are watered in specific gardens.[102]

I first arrived in Zaatari village as the summer months began to usher in sweltering temperatures. I had constructed ideas from the insights of aid workers I had spoken with, and my own perceptions about what a 'refugee space' bordering a formal camp would consist of. There appeared a potential discrepancy between how the village and its residents lived and moved, and the aid worker experience—and the influencing potential of such perceptions on spaces where refugees are concentrated. These imaginaries filter down to those who inhabit the space. Melissa Gatter discusses the symbolic significance of constructing Zaatari camp in the seemingly empty plains of northern Jordan. Building on this desert site, humanitarians consider this space as owning 'no prior history. Humanitarian perception of Za'tari as a blank slate extends to the camp's residents as well. They are treated as citizen-less and identity-less, merely because they dwell in that space'.[103] With the construction of Zaatari camp in 2012, this wider area developed in the humanitarian imagination, culminating in the idea 'that the space of the field has unique qualities and characteristics' decided upon by aid workers, representing a '*tabula rasa*: an opportunity to build from the ground up'.[104]

Remote, rural or 'merciless' terrains, and the journey required to arrive in these geographies, shape individuals' internal mapping of space, creating perceptions about people, space and (in)security, which affect practices of aid work. It is through these mechanisms that humanitarian work takes place, often having significant impacts on the ordinary lives they seek to protect. The increasing fears of insecurity, to their bodies and ability to work, and the broader relationship between security and humanitarian space—the physical geographies where work takes place and the attempts to securitize such areas—has been thoughtfully documented.[105] Further illustrated by Sam, an aid worker with experience in Zaatari, 'we didn't stay overnight there. We didn't have volunteers stay overnight there'.[106] While Sam acknowledged that crime rates were low, he had developed a distinct understanding that agency employees should not stay past dark: 'it was also a bit of a security thing'.[107] Aid workers had created geographical imaginaries about northern Jordan, and Zaatari village more specifically. The settlement was deemed unsafe for, predominantly Western, aid workers, while the inhabitants continued to be understood within a security framework. Many NGO interlocutors understood the village space through previous encounters with spaces of aid—often formal camps—while others

[102]Online interview with NGO employee, January 2021.
[103]Gatter, 'Restoring childhood': 90.
[104]Lisa Smirl, *Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism* (London: Zed Books, 2015).
[105]Ibid; Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015); Polly Pallister-Wilkins, *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives* (New York: Verso, 2022).
[106]Online interview with NGO employees, January 2021.
[107]Ibid.

constructed the village through references to projects conducted in Jordan's larger urban spaces. Mafraq is 'kind of like a countryside vibe, so you'll find like more sparse constructions. You won't see a high standard on the building conditions in Mafraq, they're all very simple, they're all very bare'.[108] Echoing Gatter,[109] the physical geography influenced perceptions of the village and extended to the people and their everyday lives. These insights referring to the harsh physical environment reveal how insecurities are channelled differently by a variety of actors, and expose complex relations between geography, movement and (in)security, beyond state policy. For some aid workers, perceptions about urban refugees come to be associated with the remote, and often precarious, locations they reside in. This precarity is influencing of refugees' possibilities of movement within state and humanitarian governance mechanisms.

Conclusion: the return journey

Zaatari village is never a static place but seems to change depending on the time of day or where you are. The village and its residents move in motion with the changing of the seasons; becoming part of a wider set of mechanisms which create and maintain the precarity of the urban refugee in Jordan. The harvest months are busy and this is reflected in the transportation services. During these months, with buses leaving only when full, the waiting time becomes shorter, suggesting an increase in persons travelling cross-country for agricultural work. Returning back to Amman on the same public bus along Damascus highway is a different experience in the mid-afternoon heat, after work. In my experience, the bus has never been stopped and the journey is never interrupted. On these drives, the bus is filled with students returning home after their lectures, and women and children, perhaps visiting friends in the capital or seeking to explore the shops in downtown Amman. The wait time for the bus is rarely shorter than an hour, and by the time we leave the station, its passengers are dozing calmly, no expectations but to arrive at their destination.

Through an initial focus of an arrest on a public bus, on a section of isolated road in-between Amman and Mafraq, this incident invites an analysis of the GoJ's security apparatus towards urban refugee movement, and the humanitarian and public perceptions of urban refugee geographies. Together, they position the urban refugee as an insecure body who is channelled through precarious structures everyday. Supported by ethnographic vignettes, the article sets off from Raghadan station, and moves along Damascus Highway to arrive at Mafraq station, before travelling east along Baghdad Highway to conclude at Zaatari village. This journey provides a lens to investigate the ways in which state security governance increases the precarity of urban refugee movement. This precarity is further compounded by spatial distance—perceived or otherwise—alongside the indiscrete, public security checks which contribute to Zaatari village, and northern Jordan more broadly, to be understood by residents of Amman and aid workers as 'other'. Subsequently, the people inhabiting this space also become the embodiment of 'otherness', moulding a distinct precarity urban refugees must navigate. Such abstract ideas become cyclical through the processes of securitizing movement, channelling

[108]Online interview with NGO employee, March 2021.
[109]Gatter, 'Restoring childhood'.

bodies and creating otherness. In paying attention to these flows, we are able to rethink the ways in which the (in)security surrounding urban refugees emerges through policy and perception, to become a lived experience in an ordinary place, such as a public bus. The journey I took on this bus was a method of moving through geographies of control, systems of security management and people's perceptions, which became links to, or triggers for, the various ways in which insecurities and precarity are accounted for in relation to Syrian urban refugees in Jordan. These insecurities are heterogenous and can transpire from experiences of informal work, missing or incomplete documents or a lack of social capital during encounters with state authorities.

This article offers two core contributions to the literature on refugee mobility and security, and urban refugee governance more broadly. First, methodologically, this approach pushes for further engagement around how experiences of urban refugee security can be studied on-the-move and acknowledges how insecurity and precarity transpire, for marginalized groups and those who operate to control them.[110] Conceiving the in-between as a space where precarity unfolds in relation to a village triggers a broader set of realities. Second, the article emphasizes how governance and living become entangled, creating imaginaries of the urban refugee, and the geographies where they reside, which incorporates the power dynamics and hierarchies that seek to manage living. In a moving box with people sleeping, eating, listening to music or mumbling in hushed tones, passengers were going about their ordinary lives. It was on this bus that the category of refugee—as distinct from Jordanian residents, navigating particular policies of control—was established in its most stark form. Through this journey, uncertainty and precarity become present in a multiplicity of ways that between them suggest an insecure quality to refugee life that is different from mere vulnerability following displacement. Moving between misinformation about the bus, randomized identification checks and strategies of public surveillance, insecurity is linked to a legitimate fear of persecution and experiences of violence and destitution. This journey has become a form of knowledge where urban refugees must gain the tools to analyse the safety of seemingly ordinary situations.

Insecurity is woven throughout this article, yet my position as a white-British female researcher provided an opportunity to observe this precarious morning journey from a position of safety; to view the insecurity of urban refugee life from a specific vantage point.

By channelling people through securitized, monitored pathways, the journey here operates to position the figure of the urban refugee and the spaces lived in as potentially obscure and ambiguous. This risks encouraging a spatial hierarchy between Amman and the northeast, conceptualizing each as distinct and unconnected. Moving through vignettes, each mode and transport hub depicts the multiplicity of ways that governance mechanisms, underpinned by security, filter into geographies of the everyday, and manifest in the lived experiences of Syrian urban refugees living in northern Jordan. Having the correct work permit or identification papers can be the difference between deportation and being allowed to return home, revealing the fragility of urban refugee lives. Meanwhile, the processes of obtaining or updating such documents often present significant

[110]Wanda Vrasti, 'Travelling with Ethnography' in *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies*, ed. Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (London: Routledge, 2012), 59–62.

risks, where urban refugees must make themselves visible to state authorities despite ongoing distrust.

The space of Zaatari village, therefore, is not neutral but shifts through forms of knowledge, governance and imaginaries.

Spatial imaginaries are made and sustained by residents, state authorities and international aid organizations, and correspond to categories defining notions of threat and security. Zaatari village and its surrounding settlements fracture such ideas, for they are not random destinations for Syrian urban refugees,[111] but act as counterpoints to the transitory and unfixed nature of refugeeness.[112] Continuing to visibly identify certain groups and spaces as unstable or insecure produces distinctions that shape perceptions of geography, populations and threat.

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ORCID

Hannah Owens http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1624-167X

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[111]Zuntz, 'Refugees' Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances'.
[112]Darling, 'Forced Migration and the city':179.