

## Border as Refuge: Demarcating Safe Spaces in Times of Conflict

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## Abstract

Borders have become one of the most controversial topics of our times. Identifiable borders, be they physical barriers, markings or the physical delimiters of socially constructed entities, are essential to how we designate living spaces, land allocations, territorial ownership and jurisdiction and, in a more abstract sense, how we analyze and study natural and social realities as such.

Throughout the war in Syria during the past few years we have seen a mass migration within and out of Syria in search of safety. Some of the internally displaced persons (IDP) sought refuge along the border with Israel, Syria's seven-decade-long mortal enemy. This choice might seem odd in light of the fact that these refugees show no intention of crossing the border into Israeli controlled areas.

The article focuses on the "border area" as a space in itself, an unplanned, independent *locus* that because of unanticipated, anomalous circumstances became a haven from danger for Syrian refugees. These "internal refugees" effectively exploited the proximity of Israeli military forces to shield and protect themselves from their current feared assailants. Syrian IDP flee to areas where personal safety and protection were considered inconceivable in the past.

The border areas adapted by Syrian displaced persons to their need for safe refuge are products of the interaction between desperate but resourceful people and the reality of displacement, insecurity and lack of shelter. The habitable spaces they created derive their distinctive character not from recognized theories of planning or regulatory oversight, but from the logic, ingenuity and inspiration of the mother of invention: necessity or, in more prosaic terms, from the exigencies of "informal planning."

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Definitions of things, places or ideas circumscribe their subject matter within boundaries that indicate what is included and what is excluded from the thing itself. Identifiable borders, be they physical barriers, markings or the physical delimiters of socially constructed entities, are essential to how we designate living spaces, land allocations, territorial ownership and jurisdiction and, in a more abstract sense, how we analyze and study nature itself. Apart from the latter epistemic use for identification and classification, in the case of socially defined entities, such as national territories, borders delineate the scope of the entity's social significance, for example the jurisdictional limits of geo-political entities. Setting the borders of a social, political or legal entity has consequences and implications over and above the epistemological dimension.

Marking territorial borders has existed throughout history<sup>1</sup> to delineate land ownership and the limits of territorial sovereignty, as well as the territorial domains of deities.<sup>2</sup> The Bible<sup>3</sup> refers to physical border markings and explicitly prohibits land theft by surreptitiously moving such markers. In Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and China territorial markings took different forms as stelae and fortifications around kingdoms, public property and national realms.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years we have witnessed challenges to modern national borders both militarily and conceptually. The heated debate in America and Europe regarding open versus closed border crossings, the proliferation of fences and walls between countries, such as India and Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Hungary and Serbia and Greece and Turkey,<sup>5</sup> the declaration by ISIS in July, 2014 of its intention to eradicate Middle Eastern borders created by France and Britain<sup>6</sup> – attest to the continued importance of borderline demarcations in today's world.

## Border Areas

National borders do not only consist of de jure borderlines demarcating the legal, political or geographical boundaries between adjoining countries

but also of “border areas” consisting of spaces, sometimes inhabitable, that can be identified and characterized as entities in themselves. These areas are not uniform or necessarily similar in nature. Some may be threatening and inhospitable like their adjoining borders, even potential launching pads for aggression, yet others may be regarded as sanctuaries from violence where “the other” is acknowledged, tolerated and accepted.

## Unplanned Spaces

One of the primary goals of zoning or designing spaces for habitation is to maximize the benefits of accessibility, convenience, safety, etc., for the intended residents. While these goals are not always achieved due to poor planning or unforeseen eventualities, the need for planning is generally regarded as necessary for providing living spaces that best fulfil our needs and expectations. What, however, about unplanned spaces or areas initially planned or zoned for one purpose but subsequently used differently? Border areas often fall into one of these indeterminate categories. The following essay will address the topic of unplanned spaces and explain, through the living example of a border area, how such spaces can be adapted to meet vital human needs during times when planned and designed spaces fail to do so.

## The Unplanned Border Area along the Israeli–Syrian Border

In the following article I shall focus on the “border area” as a space in itself, an independent *locus*, which because of unanticipated, anomalous circumstances became a haven from danger for Syrian refugees. Looking across Israel’s northern border towards the Syrian side of the Golan, one sees several informal, makeshift settlements inhabited by displaced persons who purposely situated themselves close to the border surprisingly for reasons of safety. As we shall explain in detail below, by so doing they effectively exploited the proximity of Israeli military forces to shield and protect themselves from their current feared assailants.

This unusual military and political scenario in the Golan Heights reveals how spaces adjoining borders can defy and confound our normal conception of the necessity and indispensability of planning in the creation of viable living spaces. As we shall explain, it was the absence of planning that made the Syrian encampments in areas bordering Israel into viable living spaces. In Darwinian terms, the survival of these refugees is due to their ability to adapt to an environment that, contrary to common conceptions, provides them with relative safety and protection from the ravages of war. In normal times we design and plan cities, neighborhoods and homes in order to make them livable and responsive to our needs. In times of radical, unanticipated events, such as war and social chaos, however, the uncharted potentialities of unplanned spaces may be preferable to the known benefits of planned ones.

## Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

Our historical era is increasingly being marked by population movements. These movements or displacements are due to various causes, including both “push” and “pull” factors. People are driven from their homes and native countries because of race, religion, ethnicity, politics, etc., while others are drawn to more comfortable and economically viable places.

The former “pushed” group of displaced persons consists of: a) refugees who escape to other countries and b) internally displaced persons (IDPs) who leave their homes and seek refuge within their own country.<sup>7</sup> According to the Internally Displaced Monitoring Centre over six million persons have been displaced in Syria, both internally and externally, since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. This number constitutes a little less than a third of the entire original population of Syria.<sup>8</sup> It is safe to say that all these displaced persons fled mortal danger.

This massive displacement is manifest in an exodus of Syrian refugees, primarily to Turkey, Jordan and Europe, but also to areas within Syria considered to be less threatening. Internally displaced persons differ from refugees in two substantive ways. First, they remain within their country of origin where they speak the language, know the culture and sometimes are connected to extended social networks that they can rely on for shelter and assistance. Second, unlike those who emigrate, they live within an ever-present state of warfare. While some may be closer than others to actual battle areas, they all experience the ongoing deprivations of war and displacement. One should bear in mind that these displaced persons are not accidental bystanders caught in crossfires but, despite being non-combatants, they themselves are targeted. If they inhabit areas controlled by the rebels, they are suspected of collaborating or assisting them and, therefore, they are targeted like the enemy rebel combatants.

Many internally displaced persons head towards their country’s borders, some in order to cross into a neighboring country while others may decide to remain and settle close to the border. In the latter case, there are various scenarios: some intend (but are not always able) to cross the border eventually, while others remain and set up makeshift homes near the border for as long as danger persists. In either case proximity to the border is chosen because it is considered to be a place of relative safety and refuge.<sup>9</sup>

If it were possible, personal interviews and interactions with the Syrian IDP in their border settlements would have enabled my including an account of the spatial praxis of these internally displaced people. Unfortunately, due to strictly enforced military restrictions and personal safety considerations, I was unable to obtain living testimonies save for private conversations with “sources” who, in their official capacities as international observers, soldiers, aid workers, health providers, etc., shared their experiences and observations with me. Conversations with these unofficial sources set the seemingly paradoxical ideas of border, safe area, refuge, unplanned spaces



Figure 1. A general view of a refugee camp on the Syrian side of the Israeli-Syrian border, in the Golan Heights near the Syrian village of Aesheh, June 27, 2014. Photo by: *Ancho Gosh and Gil Eliyahu – JINIPIX.*

and the like in motion in my mind. Although I have full confidence in the reliability of their observations, I respect and understand their requests to remain anonymous.

My inability to gain access to the IDP in order to present personal first-hand accounts of their spatial praxis, of the living reality of displaced people coping, improvising, and interacting with the unplanned environment of these de facto “cities of refuge” prevented me from including a first-person counterpart to the theoretical and empirical observations in this essay. In a way, this too is indicative of their precarious situation. When conditions allow, however, I hope to visit these areas in order to observe and discuss in greater detail the spatial praxis of the inhabitants of these areas.

## **The Space of Borders: A Theoretical Analysis**

Borders are demarcation lines between areas and places regarded as separate and distinct from one another. The border demarcating a sovereign area serves the double purpose of determining inclusion and exclusion. It enables those within the enclosed areas to derive meaning and cohesiveness from their location with respect to the border.<sup>10</sup> “We, who are here, are x; you who are there, are y.” This delineation signifies and reinforces the determination of political identity through jurisdiction.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of political and national sovereignty is conceptually related to the concept “border” because: a) sovereignty expresses a relationship of a certain kind, like the terms “father,” “master,” “employee” and, therefore, must be qualified with respect to something else such as a polity, a collective, a population and, in the case of political sovereignty, a territory; b) territorial sovereignty entails the exercise of certain powers within the boundaries of a particular territory and hence it entails the ability to differentiate between what or who is “in” and what or who is “out”; c) borders demarcate what/who is “in” and what/who is “out.” The “border” both in theory and in practice designates the boundaries and limits of sovereignty.

### “Misplaced Concreteness”

The conceptual definition of borders as epistemic delineators of ideas and objects is sometimes forgotten by those who identify the notion of borders with the policies they are used to implement, especially when these policies have a significant impact on people’s lives. The borders of countries whose entry and departure policies are considered objectionable and unjustified may become the main focus of attention, with their particular policies and, by association, the idea of borders as such become the primary objects of criticism. By reducing the concept of borders to one or more of its offensive, inequitable manifestations, one may turn “the border” or “borders” into an opprobrium, a concrete reification of stereotypical instantiations, such as massive concrete barriers, soldiers with machine guns, hostile border officials, etc.

In her book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown claims that “walls would seem to express power that is material, visible, centralized, and exerted corporeally through overt force and policing.”<sup>12</sup> It is undoubtedly true that people tend to associate concrete barriers with power and control, while many extend this association to the very concept of “border” as if borders per se implied discrimination and exclusion for morally indefensible reasons. Yet, as discussed previously, the logical processes of demarcation and delineation are conceptually independent of the purposes for which they may be used (or abused). Like the epistemological activities of identification and classification, these processes are vital for defining ideas, objects and human constructs as such.

The most common three-dimensional manifestations of the familiar two-dimensional border lines on maps are fences and walls. Brown acknowledges that walls and fences do not have intrinsic or persistent meaning as borders.<sup>13</sup> Hadrian’s Wall is a charming tourist attraction today but when it was constructed it surely was menacing to some and comforting to others. Physical barriers such as fences and walls (e.g., the Berlin Wall) that implement repressive, totalitarian policies are not themselves the sources of the injustice and social hardships they cause. The functional significance of such objects does not inhere in the objects themselves but is derived from their social and

political contexts and, to some extent, from the individual perspective of the observer.

Fences surrounding a playground, for example, may have been built originally to prevent children from running into a busy street. Once built, however, one may view these fences as structures built to protect and ensure the safety of the children or as borders that demarcate the limits of this particular playground. Depending on one's perspective, a child might regard the barrier as a troublesome hindrance to his or her freedom of movement, an adult might view it as a means to protect the child from injury, and a municipal official might view it as a prudent measure to protect the municipality from legal liability were an injury to occur.

## Loose Sovereignty

Apart from the variety of connotations and associations of the idea of borders depending on context and individual perspective, the physical structure, environment and atmosphere of actual borders can vary significantly. For example, even though the ambience and conditions at border crossings usually reflect the relations between the bordering sovereign countries, these areas may be characterized by an informal atmosphere of “loose sovereignty.” Most border crossings are used by ordinary people rather than by official state representatives<sup>14</sup> and, consequently, are places of informal human interactions rather than of formal political dealings. Totalitarian and police states notwithstanding, the informal atmosphere of border crossings, their special status with respect to government regulations (e.g., duty-free shops), the “interregnum” of being betwixt and between jurisdictions, namely the different regulations of the countries – all contribute to creating an ambience of an interim, autonomous region.

The border and the individual are, in this way, seen as regulatory sites – borders to be policed – and the border-crossers are the only active (and thus the only responsible) elements of immigration.<sup>15</sup>

International airports, for example, serve as national border crossings although from the perspective of sovereignty they can be described as areas of “loose sovereignty.” Countries may allow duty-free shopping or relinquish their legal right to collect VAT from local citizens traveling abroad.<sup>16</sup> This form of “loose sovereignty” also enables countries to maintain holding cells where people may be held without their being considered to have actually entered the country.

International airports usually consist of modern, contemporary structures not necessarily located on or near the country's geographical borders. The fact that these national entry and departure areas do not look like the stereotypical border crossing, reinforces the point that “the border” is ultimately a legal jurisdictional concept that may be embodied in a material object or a place.



## Shifting Borders and Gray Zones in times of Social Change

The functional significance of borders for identifying ideas, objects and social entities is best understood in times of social change when the legitimacy of certain entities and “individualities” are challenged and possibly being replaced by others. Saskia Sassen has noted that today the faces of sovereignty and of borders themselves are different from what they once were, and the mechanisms of “bordering” have changed radically, although they still exist.<sup>17</sup> Lebbeus Woods describes our situation today as a “boundary condition,” a borderline, between “globalization” leading towards the “economic and cultural unification of the planet” and ultimately to “a homogeneous geography into which all borders would simply vanish” and the established order where “borderlines separated only hostile and contradictory systems.” Due to the “inevitable delay” of the endpoint when all national borders vanish and cultural differences disappear, we are currently in a “state of ambivalence ... an indefinite “between” zone, giving new significance to the idea of “borderline.””

According to Woods we are living in an age where old national and cultural borders are gradually dissolving into new “gray zones” where the new and old mix, revealing new borders delimiting other “individualities” unlike the “social stereotypes ... of established cultures”:

within the borderline are other borderlines ... as many of them as there are individualities seeking to assert the differences that make them “other” and yet impel most of them to negotiate together some form of common ground, that which constitutes a community and a culture. The rules of dialogical negotiation within the borderline are necessarily more spontaneous, therefore more inventive, than those employing social stereotypes governing the stability-seeking centers of established cultures. What is constructed inside the borderlines is ... the tectonic and spatial elements of a new landscape.<sup>18</sup>

So, in addition to demarcating sharp “in/out” zones, border areas can obfuscate the severity of this binary condition by becoming gray areas of waning sovereignty.

## Displaced Persons and the Syrian–Israeli Border Areas

A theoretical analysis of borders may not be of much interest to displaced persons in search of refuge but examining their behavior and their reasons for selecting certain border areas rather than other areas may reveal crucial – but previously unnoticed – characteristics of these border areas. Border-crossing planners unfamiliar with historical precedents of the type occurring in Syria today may not be aware of the multidimensional nature and potentialities of these spaces.

As mentioned above, the ominous connotation of national borders as rigid “you’re in/you’re out” barriers does not apply to all border areas. Border

areas best described by notions of “loose sovereignty,” “gray zone” and “unplanned area” are places where the legislative and political presence of governments is restrained and non-threatening, where areas adjoining the actual borders are not “sterile areas” where displaced persons fear to tread. In the case of the Syrian settlements under discussion, it is clear that “loose sovereignty” was a necessary condition for their being considered as potential areas of refuge by displaced Syrians.

Displaced Syrians who chose to settle within these border areas did so not because these areas were designed as safe and comfortable residential spaces but, on the contrary, because they were unplanned and had the potential of serving their pressing, immediate needs. The refugees’ former habitations in planned residential areas could no longer deliver on their implicit promise of safe and secure living conditions and, therefore, their inhabitants had to seek radical alternatives that could provide them with the protection and safety they desperately needed.

In situations of warfare and political disorder, chaos can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, chaos generates real and immediate dangers that drive people from their homes, yet, on the other hand, chaos may disclose places of relative safety and refuge to escape to. As Lebbeus Woods states, “The lack of certain knowledge in a world of unpredictable change creates borderlines today that exist as distinct, often extensive spaces in vast gray zones of transition. These borderlines no longer separate certainties, but become spaces where uncertainties meet, interact, fuse or are repelled.”<sup>19</sup> Like Woods’ gray areas, the border areas chosen by these Syrian IDP refugees were not formless and empty but had the potential of taking on new forms and contents: “the tectonic and spatial elements of a new landscape.”<sup>20</sup>

## History of the Golan Heights

The Golan Heights geologically is an elevated plateau created by the tectonic rift that is part of the Syro-African Depression. Archeological finds attest to the familiar Levantine tradition of conquest and resettlement in this area, which has been continually inhabited for thousands of years.<sup>21</sup> The empires and populations that lived in and controlled these areas included the Amorites, Arameans, Israelites,<sup>22</sup> Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, and the Seljuks, the Fatimids, the Ottomans, the French, the Syrian Arab Republic and the State of Israel.

After being engaged with Syria in two wars, Israel today effectively controls two-thirds of the Golan Heights, although the legality of its control is not recognized by most UN members.<sup>23</sup> Without expanding on the legal, military and strategic aspects of this controversial situation, suffice it to say that relative calm has prevailed east of the de facto border, that is, the ceasefire lines, during the past several years. Unlike other Israeli borders, very few violent clashes have occurred since the last major war between Israel and Syria in



Figure 2. Map by Maier Yagod based on © OpenStreetMap contributors.

October 1973. Even the potential escalation of hostilities during the 1982 Lebanon War did not materialize but evolved into a quiet balance of power. Although the two countries are officially in a state of war, commerce has taken place between Israeli and Syrian controlled areas.<sup>24</sup>

The borderline that exists today is the result of ceasefire negotiations between Israel and Syria and is administered by the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Established in 1974, UNDOF patrols the ceasefire lines and acts as a de facto go-between for forces on both sides of the border. There are three lines that form a buffer zone between the two countries: the border itself, known as the “Purple Line,” which is shadowed by the “Alpha” line to the West, which Israeli forces are not permitted to cross. A third line, the “Bravo” line, shadows the border to the East, which Syrian forces may not cross.

UN forces do not patrol the Area of Separation (AOS) as regularly as they did before March 2013, when 21 Fijian UN personnel were taken captive by the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade<sup>25</sup> linked to Islamic State (ISIS) and later released. UNDOF still staffs the unofficial border crossings between Israel and Syria, but although established to supervise the ceasefire, UNDOF has neither the mandate nor the ability to protect the Syrian civilian population. Mainly engaged in observation and reporting, UNDOF forces do not constitute a military factor to be reckoned with in the region. As a result, the safety that internally displaced persons sought could not be provided by UNDOF but, ironically, could be as I shall explain, by the Israeli army.

The Golan Heights played a minor role in the Syrian Civil War which began as part of what was then referred to as the “Arab Spring.” In the course of the war various forces controlled different parts of the Syrian Golan Heights, including Bashar Assad’s government army, aided by the Hezbollah and Iranian government troops; ISIS forces, their affiliates and offshoots; and other Syrian opposition forces as well. The balance of power in these areas is not really germane to our topic and, in any event, by the time of publication it may change substantially.<sup>26</sup> What is relevant, however, is the fact that the political and military changes can and do affect the movement of civilians seeking refuge from the forces controlling a given area and/or from the forces fighting the forces controlling that area.

This blood-soaked civil war led to massive migrations of Syrians in search of safety both within and beyond the borders of their country. Among the displaced persons who remained in Syria some resettled close to the border with Israel. These areas, which previously had been used mainly as farmland, ceased being cultivated due to the ravages of war. The marred and bomb-cratered landscape reveals the unmistakable signs of war, sadly reminding us that though chosen by these displaced persons as “safe areas,” the designation “safe” should always be qualified as “relatively safe.” While safer than their abandoned homes and towns, these areas are not free of the mortal dangers that plague this war-torn region.

## **An Original Understanding of “Safe Area”**

Our use of the term “safe space” or “safe area” differs completely from the accepted usage of the term in architecture and in city and neighborhood planning with respect to normally functioning societies. A vast literature exists on the subject of crime prevention and the promotion of neighborhood safety through environmental design. The term “Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)” was popularized largely by the criminologist C. Ray Jeffery<sup>27</sup> and the architect Oscar Newman, who coined the term “Defensible Spaces.”<sup>28</sup> Because personal safety and protection are considered basic elements of the *genius loci* most people want in their dwelling spaces, the idea was to plan neighborhoods whose physical design and layout maximized surveillance, transparency and safety.

Another familiar use by planners of the qualifier “safe” together with “space,” “area” or “zone” is the “eyes on the street”<sup>29</sup> concept formulated by Jane Jacobs in *The Rise and Fall of Great American Cities*,<sup>30</sup> where neighbors are expected to look out for one another and maintain the safety of their neighborhoods by their overt presence in the streets. This idea, termed “natural surveillance” by Jeffery and others, is of interest for our current topic only to highlight the striking contrast between the types of surveillance believed to produce the coveted safety of these two “safe areas.” In the case of Syrian IDPs near the Israeli border, surveillance is performed not by naturally caring neighbors but by an enemy whose wariness and vigilance produces deterrence that, in turn, produces the relative safety of the areas wherein the IDP find refuge. The phenomenon of a threat of violence sustaining the absence of violence brings to mind the situation of mutual deterrence during the cold war period between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Border Area: A Safe Space of Refuge**

As discussed above, the border as a geopolitical zone often evokes images of an intimidating place, a gradient space marked by ominous warning signs, like “Border Ahead!” as if proximity to the border was inherently correlated with increased danger and risk. For many, it is inconceivable that people would actually choose to live in such areas.

Yet, in certain parts of the world these very spaces are being inhabited as places of refuge, ironically because of the perceived consequences of these intimidating features, albeit indirectly. The encampments of internally displaced people along the Israel–Syria border in the Golan Heights show that this anomalous phenomenon is not unique, capricious or unreasonable.<sup>32</sup>

Situated as close as possible to the Israeli border on the Syrian side, the safety of the IDP encampments is sustained by a seemingly counter-intuitive logic: instead of seeking safety in places that are secluded, inaccessible and facilitate arms procurement for self-defense, these displaced persons chose an area that is public, open, accessible and conspicuously close to an arch-enemy’s border. Given the realization that the arch-enemy is the enemy of their immediate, more threatening enemy and is not bent on exploiting their weakness and vulnerability, the IDP’s rationale is quite sound and simple: If fired upon by government or opposition forces, and if a rocket, bullet or other projectile falls inadvertently on the Israeli side, then the Israeli army will retaliate forcefully. The likelihood of this scenario occurring is not negligible. It occurred on a number of occasions,<sup>33</sup> and Israel’s consistent military responses to what it refers to as “spill over” has had a deterrent effect, which, in turn, has resulted in the relative calm and safety of the IDP border area settlements. Thus, the zones immediately adjacent to the Israeli border ceased being dangerous no-go zones but, instead, became the very opposite: places of refuge for displaced Syrians.

The political and nuclear strategist Thomas C. Schelling explained the principle of deterrence best:

Thus, strategy – in the sense in which I am using it here – is not concerned with the efficient *application* of force but with the *exploitation of potential force*. It is concerned not just with enemies who dislike each other but with partners who distrust or disagree with each other. It is concerned not just with the division of gains and losses between two claimants but with the possibility that particular outcomes are worse (better) for *both* claimants than certain other outcomes.<sup>34</sup>

By taking refuge in these border areas, these Syrian IDPs turned the Israeli army into the unwitting guarantor of their safety. In this case, the enemy of my enemy is not my friend but my de facto protector.

It would be mistaken to liken the safety of these areas to the “calm in the eye of the storm” phenomenon. The Golan border IDP settlements actually turn on its head the idea that central areas in a conflict, where the command headquarters and the main forces are located, are necessarily safer than outlying areas less protected and more vulnerable to attack. In the case of the Golan, the peripheral areas are less likely to be attacked because of the grave risk of opening up additional fronts with neighboring enemy forces. Also, the powerful deterrent effect of attacking in these areas is not lost on government and opposition forces who exploit these areas to their advantage. Like that of refuge-seeking IDP, their strategy is that attacking enemy forces near the Israeli border runs the risk of accidentally provoking severe Israeli retaliation.

We should not be naïve about the intentions and interests of the involved parties. Israel does not maintain an army for the benefit of Syrian displaced persons, but, rather, in order to prevent infiltration from its northern border. Nevertheless, neither the Syrian army nor the opposition rebels have a good track record in protecting Syrian lives. Clearly marked white refugee tents were less than effective in protecting the refugees in al-Rukban near the Jordanian border on January 21, 2017.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the deterrence-based safe zones adjoining the Israeli border, the location of the al-Rukban refugee camp in the demilitarized zone between Jordan and Syria, and the conspicuous markings of IDP habitations provided little, if any, protection for the civilian population, as the number of targeted IDP camps shows.<sup>36</sup> That being said, less than 4,000 refugees<sup>37</sup> have chosen the border with Israel as a place of refuge, while around 70,000 internally displaced persons reside in Rukban alone.



Figure 3. An Israeli army vehicle patrols the Israeli-Syrian border, near a refugee camp on the Syrian side of the border in the Golan Heights near the Syrian village of Aesheh, June 27, 2014. Photo by *Ancho Gosh and Gil Eliyahu – JINIPIX*.

## The Physical Configuration of the Israel–Syria Border

The physical configuration of the border zone in the Golan Heights has changed over the past few years. Whereas on the Syrian side, the fortifications have not been modified significantly, on the Israeli side, there have been changes that reflect an anticipated future threat to its border. In the past, most of the physical barriers on the Israeli side consisted of groundworks, such as anti-tank trenches, easily blockaded roads, mine fields, etc., aimed primarily at blocking the advancement of vehicles and tanks. The border fence consisted of a non-lethal signaling mechanism that served mainly as an electronic sensor against the intrusion of enemy forces. Today the threat is viewed in terms of pedestrians approaching en masse, not unlike the incident that occurred on May 15, 2011, when Palestinian demonstrators managed to cross the border and enter the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.<sup>38</sup>

The Israeli forces have no intention of allowing IDP refugees to cross the border (other than for medical treatment), nor do the refugees show any inclination to do so. During past years, Israel has constructed a high wired fence that: a) can limit the advance of marching pedestrians, and b) enables visual surveillance of the Syrian side where large concrete barriers had previously limited surveillance.

The landscape and defensive formations on the Israeli side have similarly undergone changes. While the older mechanisms still exist, they are not routinely upgraded.<sup>39</sup> Strategic placement of army bases, watchtowers and electronic surveillance equipment enables the IDF to observe the border without frequent regular patrols. The army's orientation seems more towards visual surveillance than physical obstructions. Long-range surveillance systems render the deployment of personnel and physical obstacles less critical and minimize the exposure of patrols to cross-border sniper fire. As a result the need for a large physical military presence along the border has diminished.

## Informal Planning: Pros and Cons

Persons fleeing battle zones in Syria are, in many cases, fleeing the Syrian state itself. The structures, frameworks and bureaucracies that were created ostensibly for the benefit and welfare of the citizenry have been used on various occasions during the past few years to the detriment of the citizenry.

Formal planning is essential for the orderly management of any state. To this end, planned neighborhoods, streets, addressable buildings and homes organize the landscape into units that can be identified and accessed by name, address, location, etc. Even traditional villages can be subject to infrastructural regulations and norms. The imposition of such regulatory standards enables the state to manage and provide vital services to its citizens. States can control and regulate planned living spaces that comprise the physical skeletal structure of the state. Mail can be delivered, sewage systems can dispose of



noxious waste, garbage can be collected and removed by government sanitation workers, etc.

Informal planning, on the other hand, occurs primarily when the state apparatus does not deliver the quality of life it promises and is mandated to provide, or, in extreme situations, when the state turns against its own citizens. The concept of informal planning has been extensively explored in architectural literature in the 1960s by John F. C. Turner, Rem Koolhaas, Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner and others.<sup>40</sup> One of the main ideas that emerged was that there is value and intellectual capital in the spaces created by informal planning. In their article, “The Ideologies of Informality: Informal Urbanisation in the Architectural and Planning Discourses,” Jan Van Ballegooijen and Roberto Rocco discuss various approaches and attitudes in the architectural critique of informal planning, especially the tendency by some to idealize these forms of urban living spaces.<sup>41</sup>

Stable governments discourage temporary forms of habitation and other by-products of informal planning because they are difficult to manage and control. Governments prefer organized, structured living spaces with clear reference points and principles of operation that are similar throughout the state. That being said, it is often the state itself that is responsible for engaging in or allowing informal planning within its field of jurisdiction.<sup>42</sup>

The makeshift Syrian IDP settlements near the Israeli border do not appear to have a regular or planned grid. The houses are covered with white tarp possibly in order to ensure their visibility and distinctness on the landscape and to indicate to the onlooker: “We have no part in the war.” Each settlement consists of several scores of houses that noticeably are *not* temporary dwellings, such as tents or caravans, but small dwellings made of light construction material. The dwellings appear to have been built with anticipated lifespans of several months and even years. There are satellite dishes on the roofs of some of the houses, but, on the whole, the settlements look like the living spaces of the Irish Travelers of the British Isles.

In short, these settlements have the characteristic appearance and structural composition of informal planning, that is, their singular purpose is to provide for the immediate needs of their inhabitants by making use of materials and resources that are readily available in the proximate environment. Their design and construction reflect what Hernando de Soto referred to as “Survival Strategy.”<sup>43</sup>

Unplanned settlements may succeed, where their planned counterparts fail, at answering the immediate ad hoc needs of people living in extraordinary, dire circumstances, such as those faced by the internally displaced Syrians. Settlements created through informal planning, however, invariably exhibit the qualities of temporality and impermanence even if they persist many years.

Despite its situational advantage in unanticipated, extreme circumstances, informal planning is far less proficient than its formal counterpart at solving infrastructural, climatic and long-term issues of stability and decay,



Figure 4. View of a refugee camp on the Syrian side of the Israeli-Syrian border, in the Golan Heights near the Syrian village of Briqa, east of Quneitra, February 17, 2016. Photo by *Ancho Gosh and Gil Eliyahu – JINIPIX*.

endurance and deterioration, which invariably require professional experience and expertise based on the extensive knowledge base of standards, regulations, bureaucratic management skills and academic and professional schooling, research and training.

### **The Border Area: Unplanned Spaces in Unplanned Times**

Planning of space for habitation is a dynamic, multi-dimensional endeavor. Conventional formal approaches to planning and design rely on principles and methodologies appropriate for developing “normal” environments and spaces, but not for dealing with exceptional conditions like those faced by the Syrian IDPs. While this does not negate the invaluable importance of professional knowledge, experience and familiarity with the history and variety of living spaces and cultural preferences, it shows that habitation design is ultimately a process, an interactive negotiation between expectations and reality, a human project that may not be reduced to dogmatic conceptions and standardized practices.

One does not usually see a natural growth of inhabitants in borders areas, especially those that do not facilitate trade and commerce. While this is true under normal circumstances when people seek the benefits of planned spaces, under exceptional circumstances, when survival is a predominant concern,

unplanned, loosely governed, gray areas can provide the best conditions for responding to the unplanned, abnormal conditions of life. This is why the border area can become an ideal space in which to live.

The border area spaces created by Syrian displaced persons are products of the interaction between desperate but resourceful people and the reality of displacement, insecurity and lack of shelter. The habitable spaces they created derive their distinctive character not from recognized theories of planning or regulatory oversight, but from the logic, ingenuity and inspiration of the mother of invention: necessity or, in more prosaic terms, from the exigencies of “informal planning.”

The displaced persons who found refuge and relative safety in Golan Heights border areas are not at the end of their journey because, unfortunately, the people of Syria are likely to undergo further hardships in the foreseeable future. But from the current presence of displaced Syrians in these border zones and the dialectical nature of the rationale behind their perception of these areas as potential safe zones we can learn much about unplanned spaces and habitation in general. The marking of new boundaries for the purpose of transforming a classic, presumably hostile, border area into a habitable refuge zone shows how the gray borderlines of unplanned spaces can be reshaped to meet the unanticipated, unplanned needs of displaced persons seeking safety and protection.

## Notes

- 1 Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 561. “Frontiers and routes were always of major importance, and hence were marked by royal stelae, as well as by royally built and heavily garrisoned fortresses set on summits dominating the surround terrain.” Tim J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars c. 1000–264 BC* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 203–206. The boundaries of Rome and its territories were marked both by religious ceremonies dating back to Etruscan times as well as by physical earthworks and markings. For this and the concept of *pomerium* (“sacred boundary”), see *ibid.* 167, 195, 199, 203. László Török, *Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt, 3700 BC–AD 500* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 406. “If we accept Schubert’s suggestion (182) that the title of defender of the wicker-work barrier refers to a frontiers station defended by earthen walls, we may conclude that as to military presence a difference was made between the Dodekaschoinos and the rest of the occupied region lying between Maharraqa and the Second Cataract.”
- 2 Steven Grosby, “Borders, Territory and Nationality in the Ancient Near East and Armenia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40,1 (1997): 1–29; reprinted in *idem*, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 4–5, 7, 13, 16–17, 20–24. Contrary to this approach, some scholars maintain that with respect to the ancient world, one may talk only about boundaries and not borders, see Antony Giddens, *A Contemporary*

- Critique of Historical Marxism. II. The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 49–53.
- 3 Deuteronomy 19:14, 27:17, Job 24:2, Proverbs 15:25, 22:28, Hosea 5:10.
  - 4 *supra*. notes 1–2.
  - 5 Simon Greaves and Lize Faunce, “Rise of the Border Wall Shows There Is More That Divides Us,” *The Financial Times*, March 26, 2017, accessed May 31, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/9d4d10cc-0e28-11e7-b030-768954394623>.
  - 6 Malise Ruthven, “The Map ISIS Hates,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 25, 2014, accessed May 31, 2017, [www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/25/map-isis-hates/](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/25/map-isis-hates/).
  - 7 The U.N. defines IDP as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.” Francis Deng, Annex “The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,” E/CN.4/1998/53/Add. 1, p. 5 February 11. New York, NY: United Nations. New York: United Nations.
  - 8 “Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre” (IDMC), accessed April 21, 2017, [www.internal-displacement.org/database/country/?iso3=syr/](http://www.internal-displacement.org/database/country/?iso3=syr/).
  - 9 For example, most refugees from war-torn Central African Republic of Congo settled on the borders of the two neighboring countries, Cameroon and Chad. UNICEF Chad Humanitarian Situation Report, 30 April, 2017, accessed 30 May, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/chad/unicef-chad-humanitarian-situation-report-april-2017/>.
  - 10 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 42.
  - 11 *Ibid.* 50.
  - 12 *Ibid.* 81.
  - 13 *Ibid.* 74.
  - 14 *Ibid.* 21.
  - 15 Aleksandra Wagner and Alexander Stein, “The Trouble with Borders” in *Borderline*, Lebbeus Woods and Ekkhard Rehfeld, eds. (Wien, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1998).
  - 16 In duty-free shops the state is not supposed to make any income on the products being sold.
  - 17 Saskia Sassen, “When National Territory is Home to the Global: Old Borders to Novel Borderings,” *New Political Economy* 10,4 (December 2005): 527–528.
  - 18 Lebbeus Woods, “Inside the Borderline,” in *Borderline*, Lebbeus Woods and Ekkhard Rehfeld, eds. (Wien, New York: Springer Verlag, 1998).
  - 19 Lebbeus, “Inside the Borderline” in *Borderline*.
  - 20 *Ibid.*
  - 21 Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Equinox, 1990), 18, 80, 134, 179, 191, 203, 209, 214. Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC*, 319. Ronnie Ellenblum, *Frankish Rural Settlement in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

- Press, 1998), 219–20. David Dean Commins, *Historical Dictionary of Syria* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 77. There were periods when the Golan was less populated and even described as desolate, but there always was some sort of human presence in this area.
- 22 In the Book of Deuteronomy the Golan is mentioned as one of the three cities of refuge east of the Jordan River (Deuteronomy 4:43).
  - 23 UN Security Council, Security Council resolution 497 (1981) [Israel–Syrian Arab Republic], December 17, 1981, S/RES/497 (1981), available at: [www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f15734.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f15734.html), accessed June 6, 2017.
  - 24 Maier Yagod, “Third Form Cross Border Cartography – A Middle Eastern Exo-Structure,” *Monu Magazine on Urbanism* 22 (Spring 2015): 24–31.
  - 25 It later merged into the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army. Phil Sands and Suha Maayeh, “Far from Raqqa and Fallujah: Syria Rebels Open New Front against ISIL in the South,” *The National*, May 29, 2016, accessed March 15, 2017: [www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/far-from-raqqa-and-fallujah-syria-rebels-open-new-front-against-isil-in-the-south#full/](http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/far-from-raqqa-and-fallujah-syria-rebels-open-new-front-against-isil-in-the-south#full/).
  - 26 Other forces may also have had a presence in the Golan Heights during this conflict.
  - 27 Jeffery, C. Ray, *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design* (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications, 1971).
  - 28 Oscar Newman, *Creating Defensible Space*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1996), 1–4, 9, 86–97, 115.
  - 29 Jane, Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 42–43, 54–55.
  - 30 Ibid.
  - 31 Thérèse Delpéch, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation), 23–28. The book focuses on active deterrence through armaments, but concepts such as “deterrence” and “second strike” are relevant insofar as they describe the prevention of violence through the threat of violence.
  - 32 Similar cases of the use of the border area as refuge can be seen on the Turkish/Syrian border, on the Turkish/Iraqi border, and the Jordanian/Syrian border during the present conflict in Syria. Similar cases can also be found on the borders of Central African Republic/Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic/Chad and Myanmar/Thailand.
  - 33 For example, on September 10, 2016, the Israeli airforce attacked Syrian army posts after projectiles hit the Golan. According to the article, Israel holds the Assad regime responsible for all errant missile fire regardless of the source. AFP and *Times of Israel* staff, “IAF Strikes Syrian Army Posts after Projectile Hits Golan,” *The Times of Israel*, September 10, 2016, accessed January 10, 2017, [www.timesofisrael.com/projectile-strikes-golan-thought-to-be-errant-rocket-from-syria/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/projectile-strikes-golan-thought-to-be-errant-rocket-from-syria/)
  - 34 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass:1960, 1980), 5 [italics in the original].
  - 35 Reuters/Muhammad Hamed, “Deadly Bomb Blast Hits Rakban Refugee Camp near Jordan” January 2017, retrieved April 14, 2017. [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/deadly-bomb-blast-hits-syria-rakban-refugee-camp-1701](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/deadly-bomb-blast-hits-syria-rakban-refugee-camp-1701)

- 21130211057.html/. Major attacks were also reported on June 21, 2016 and December 17, 2016.
- 36 Katrina Lenner and Sussanne Schmelter, “Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: Between Refuge and Ongoing Deprivation?” in *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2016 (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean), 124.
  - 37 “In a Forgotten Corner of Syria, Camp Residents Cling to Life: ‘We Need Everything,’” *Syria Direct* August 8, 2016, accessed January 15, 2017. <http://syriadirect.org/news/in-a-forgotten-corner-of-syria-camp-residents-cling-to-life-%E2%80%98we-need-everything%E2%80%99/>
  - 38 D. L., “Israel: Unrest on the Borders,” *The Economist*, May 15, 2011. Archived from the original on May 19, 2011, retrieved May 16, 2011.
  - 39 This is radically different than the case of Israel’s border with Lebanon where the Israeli army has constructed massive groundworks during the last few years. Judah Ari Gross, “With Berms, Cliffs and Concrete, a Sun Tzu-Quoting Major Works to Keep Hezbollah Out,” April 14, 2017, retrieved April 14, 2017. [www.timesofisrael.com/with-berms-cliffs-and-concrete-a-sun-tzu-quoting-major-works-to-keep-hezbollah-out/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/with-berms-cliffs-and-concrete-a-sun-tzu-quoting-major-works-to-keep-hezbollah-out/)
  - 40 John Turner et al., “The Squatter Settlement: An Architecture that Works,” *Architectural Design*, 38 (1968), John Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments, Ideas in Progress* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), John Turner, *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), Rem Koolhaas and Harvard Project on the City, “Lagos,” in *Mutations*, S. Boeri, S. Kwinter, N. Tazi, and H. U. Obrist, eds. (Barcelona: Actar, 2001), Alfredo Brillembourg, and Hubert Klumpner, “Slum Lifting: An Informal Toolbox for Architecture as Infrastructure” in *Infrastructure as Architecture: Designing Composite Networks*, Katrina Stoll and Scott Lloyd, eds. (Berlin: Jovis, 2010), 26–35.
  - 41 Jan Van Ballegooijen and Roberto Rocco, “The Ideologies of Informality: Informal Urbanisation in the Architectural and Planning Discourses,” *Third World Quarterly* 34,10 (2013): 1794–1810, especially pages 1802, 1807–1809.
  - 42 Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71,2 (2005): 147–158.
  - 43 Van Ballegooijen and Rocco, 1805. Ballegooijen and Rocco present the work done by Nezar Alsayyad on the topic of informal planning.

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