

## From Tent to Makeshift Housing

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KAMEL DORAÏ + PAULINE PIRAUD-FOURNET

From Tent to Makeshift Housing:  
A Case Study of a Syrian Refugee in  
Zaatari Camp (Jordan)

Zaatari refugee camp, a makeshift  
city built by refugees

Strict regulations have been imposed in the Syrian refugee camps in order to avoid any form of permanent settlement. Despite these constraints, a city has emerged out of the dynamism of its inhabitants. As soon as the camp opened, an informal economy developed throughout the different neighbourhoods of the camp. From the main entry gate, a shopping street developed (Fig. 1), with many shops of all kinds: mobile phone shops, clothing and wedding dress stores, groceries, bakeries, small restaurants, hairdressers and so on. Street vendors stroll around the camp selling all kinds of products or sandwiches. Close to many facilities established by NGOs, this shopping street is frequented by a large number of refugees. It has become a central living space symbolizing their economic dynamism.

The refugees have partly gathered by family and village of origin. Prefabricated structures and tents have been progressively reorganised to create living areas that, although precarious, have enabled people to have their own private living space. Today, five years after the opening of the camp, there are almost no tents left, except as an extension to prefabricated living structure or to cover the inner courtyard of the housing. The materials distributed by the humanitarian agencies are reused and transformed by residents. The camp is not anymore a juxtaposition of standardised settlements. Instead, some of the refugees recreate traditional forms of housing that are fairly similar to those in Southern Syria or in the informal neighbourhoods in the outskirts of large Syrian cities. In these makeshift and freestanding shelters, two spaces have a special status and play an important social role: the room where guests are received (*madhafeh* in Arabic) and the courtyard, as an outdoor living area and a lock between the street and the home. People from outside the family can gather in the *madhafeh*, where mattresses are arranged on the floor, thus serving as a meeting room for men. The women, meanwhile, gather in the courtyard to cook together, or in adjoining rooms where they talk.

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Case study - Faysal's family in Zaatari camp

During regular visits in Zaatari camp between 2012 and 2017, we interviewed several refugee families and conducted housing surveys. This revealed some aspects of refugees' daily life, the problems they face and the coping strategies they developed to circumvent restrictions and economic difficulties.

Faysal, his wife and four children left Bosra in October 2012. At this time, informal crossing points were still open between Syria and Jordan. Similar to all the refugees who entered Jordan after July 2012, the family was directed towards the Zaatari refugee camp. In May 2017, they were resettled in France and left the camp.

In Syria, Faysal lived with his parents, brothers and family in a small house in the ancient and medieval town centre of Bosra. Each family had a room set around a small courtyard. A large garden next to the house belonged to the family. In October 2012, Faysal, two of his brothers and their families were forced to leave Bosra because of the war. Upon their arrival in the Zaatari camp in October 2012, the family was given a tent by the UNHCR in the third district (Fig. 2, n°1). Sometimes, several families had to share

one of these tents - almost 6m long and 4m wide, 24 m<sup>2</sup>. At that time, the kitchens and the sanitary blocks (showers, toilets, laundry) were collective and built in concrete. Because of the lack of space inside the tents, families used to spend a significant part of their daily life in the only space available, the streets; the tent was used for eating meals, as a bedroom and a *madhafeh*. A few months later, refugees began to transform their tents by themselves, adding a wood-



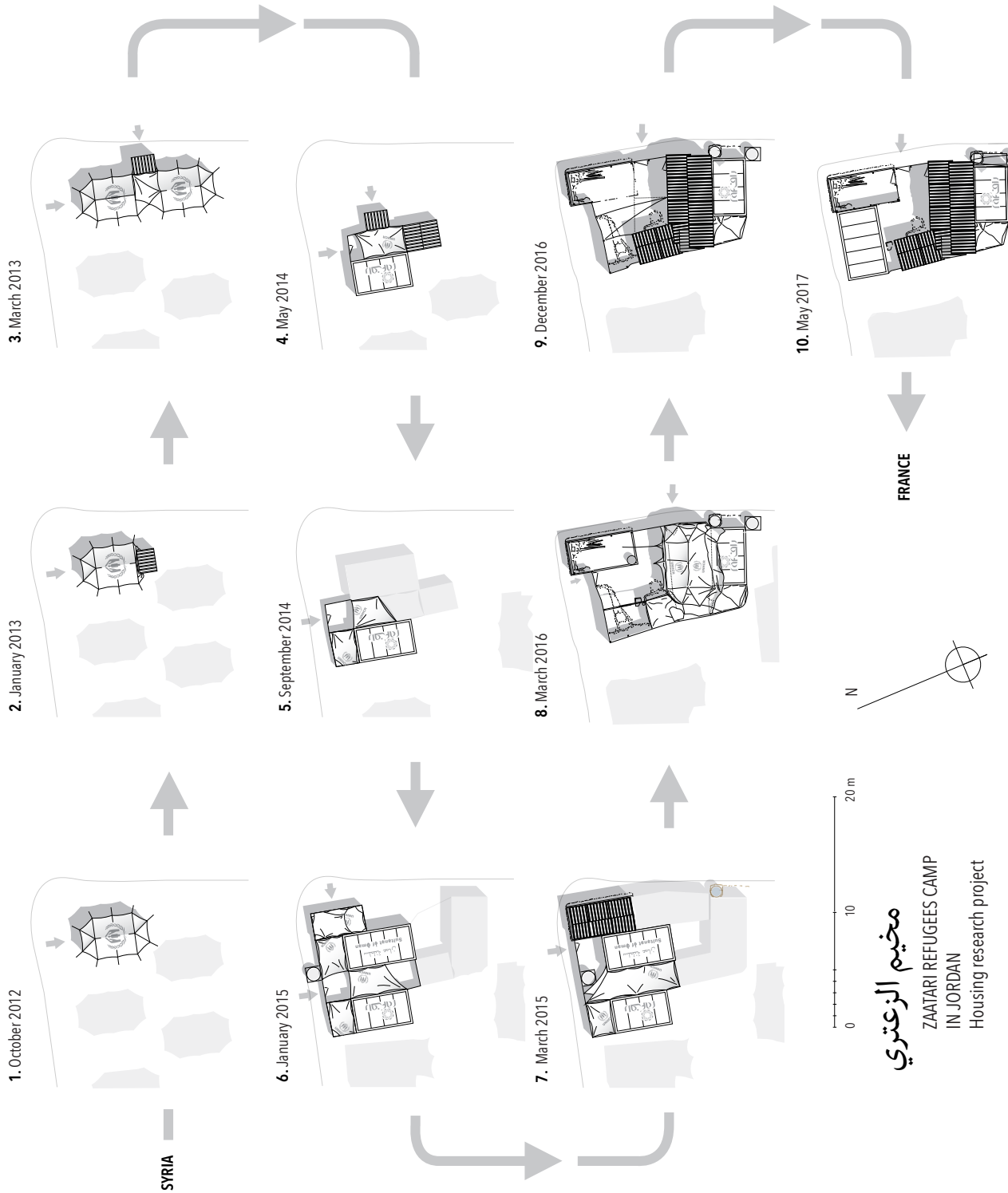
1. Zaatari. The main street of the camp, called Shari' as-Souk, in 2017 (P. Piraud-Fournet 2017).

... (The text continues in Hebrew, describing the living conditions and the transformation of tents into makeshift housing.)

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en structure, used as a store room, with walls and roof in corrugated iron (*zinco*) (Fig. 2, n°2). In March 2013, Faysal acquired a second tent that he connected to the first (Fig. 2, n°3) and doubled the surface of

its housing. One served as a bedroom, the other as a kitchen and bathroom. The corrugated iron construction was transformed into a small informal shop, next the tents, where Faysal started selling second



استبيان للخطط المتلاحقة لمنزل فيصل بين عامي 2012 و2017 (ت فورتيه وب - فورتيه، 2017).  
 2. Measured survey of the successive plans of Faysal's house between 2012 and 2017  
 (T. Fournet and P. Piraud-Fournet, 2017).

...التي استخدمها كغرفة تخزين، مع جدران وسقف من الحديد المطبق (*zinco*) (الشكل 2، رقم 2). في آذار 2013، حصل فaisal على خيمة ثانية التي ارتبطت بالاولى (الشكل 2، رقم 3) وجمعت مساحة السكن...

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