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# Camp Code

*How to navigate a refugee settlement.*

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Entrance to Bourj Al Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon. [All photos by the author]

Start with the obvious: not all refugee camps are the same. The experiences of some 60 million people — “one in every 122 humans,” according to the United Nations<sup>1</sup> — cannot be generalized. They live in tarp shelters, tents, shipping containers, or concrete buildings; in formal settlements administered by the UN, or in makeshift camps on the urban fringe. They are refugees, asylum seekers, stateless, internally displaced. Around the world, their numbers are increasing.

In Lebanon, the crisis (or, rather, series of crises) has been going on since 1948. More than 1 million Syrians and 450,000 Palestinians — an astonishing one quarter of the population — live in twelve official refugee camps and hundreds of informal settlements.<sup>2</sup> The oldest camps, once considered temporary, are home to third- and fourth-generation refugees. These are not tent camps but dense spaces of concrete and asphalt, urban materializations of an ongoing state of emergency.<sup>3</sup>

What goes on inside a refugee camp? How is it organized spatially and materially?<sup>4</sup> In these brief sketches, I invite readers to navigate the Palestinian camp of Bourj Al Shamali,<sup>5</sup> situated high on a hill in southern Lebanon, overlooking the Mediterranean city of Tyre. Built as a temporary refuge in 1955, it is now an overcrowded, unplanned, permanent ‘city-camp’ housing 23,000 registered refugees in 135,000 square meters.<sup>6</sup> It would be easy to drive right past it, mistaking it for a poor district of the adjacent village that shares its name. Seven decades after the camp was founded, what

distinguishes the supposedly temporary from the supposedly permanent is anything but clear.<sup>7</sup>

Lebanese Army checkpoint at the camp entrance.

## The Entrance Checkpoint

Your first stop is a Lebanese Army checkpoint on the main entrance road. Foreigners need a permit to enter the camp. It's not hard to obtain, but it takes a few days, and it helps to know someone who can shepherd your request through the *mukhabarat*, the army intelligence service. The permit system deters curious strangers and helps authorities monitor the population. It also makes the camp feel like an open-air prison. Strict access controls and constant surveillance discourage visits from friends and family members and remind refugees that their life is not entirely their own.

Leaving the camp is easier, at least in tranquil times. You won't trigger any controls, other than a wave from the soldier on duty. But the checkpoint is fickle: it can be strict or lax, depending on current events and the mood of the guards.

Fifty meters down the road is a second checkpoint, run by Fatah.<sup>8</sup> Here a Palestinian soldier stands at attention, hand on his gun, while middle-aged men sit in white plastic chairs, drinking coffee and discussing politics. They don't check papers. At most, you'll get a hard stare. Bourj Al Shamali is one of the quietest Palestinian camps in Lebanon, and these are relatively quiet times.

Informal pedestrian entrance.

## Crossing the Border

If you don't have a permit, you can still get in. There are five unofficial entrances: former village streets barricaded with cement blocks that allow pedestrians to pass, but not cars. The camp is irregularly shaped, following the property lines of land rented by the Lebanese government for 99 years. Within these borders, the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East \(UNRWA\)](#) has provided services since 1955.

When you cross that border, you are in a zone of urban informality.<sup>9</sup> The unplanned streets and haphazard buildings announce that this is a place of legal exception, outside regulation, where a state of emergency is the norm.<sup>10</sup> On every corner you see reminders of the Arab-Israeli conflict: political graffiti, posters of "martyrs" lost in battle, paintings of the Dome of the Rock and of keys that symbolize the properties left behind in historic Palestine.

There is no wall surrounding the refugee camp; in some cases, construction goes right up to the street barricades. On the southern and eastern borders, lush orange trees and banana plantations lie beyond a barbed wire fence.

Mural with map and key.

## Don't Look for a Map

On public maps of Lebanon — paper or online — refugee camps are often shown as gray blobs, with no detailed view of the street plan. Useful maps of Bourj Al Shamali exist, but they are held tightly by international organizations who regard the circulation of such knowledge as a security risk. That partly explains the unplanned growth. To live without a map is to exist without a future, in a space forever uncharted. Maps of historic Palestine, on the other hand, are everywhere: on flags and banners, walls, keychains, t-shirts.<sup>11</sup>

There are no signed streets or alleys, either. Here the hill helps you get your bearings, but it's easy to get lost in the jumble of alleys (especially compared to the nearby camps Rashadiyeh and Al Bass, which were built in the 1930s for Armenian refugees and planned by the French on a street grid). The camp is divided informally into neighborhoods named after agricultural villages in the Safad and Tiberias regions of Palestine. When the first refugees arrived, they moved in groups and settled with others from their home villages.<sup>12</sup> Even today, people in Bourj Al Shamali give directions that incorporate landmarks from those old villages. This way of navigating depends on a collective memory of place that is shared even by younger generations who have never visited the referents for the local toponyms.

That shared memory is maintained by groups like Al Houlah Association, which runs the main library in camp. Named after a lake in Palestine that bordered many of the old villages (now the Hula Valley Natural Reserve in Israel), the association aims to reconnect the community with its heritage and to reinforce a sense of civil society. Recently, signs have been installed on houses in camp that report details about the inhabitants' villages of origin.

Main street in Bourj Al Shamali.

Fruit market at the camp entrance.

## Crossroads

Just past the entrance is the camp's main crossroads, which functions as a public square. Here you'll find men waiting for work, or just waiting for something to happen, while around them cars and people pass in every direction. This is also the open-air depot where food is deposited. Boxes of produce and eggs pile up amid the watchful men. The cafes and streets hum with activity at all hours.

Unemployment is very high in camp — around 60 percent — in part because Lebanon prohibits Palestinian refugees from working in major professions, from medicine to engineering to architecture. The main opportunities are seasonal day labor in

agricultural fields around Tyre, or illegal work outside the camp. Many families rely on funds from relatives abroad, and young people dream of emigrating. The hottest gossip is about migration routes and costs, and which mafia groups to trust along the way. Everyone shares stories of those who have made it to Europe.

Like many refugee camps, Bourj Al Shamali is located close to a transportation hub and to an international border. This vision of mobility *just out of reach* contrasts with the enforced immobility of the camp residents. Still, they have informal public transit systems tailored to their own needs. Rundown Mercedes operate as shared taxis, providing transportation on fixed routes for a small fee. Larger collective vans, laden with plastic pails, transport fruit pickers to orchards and fields near Tyre. Men and women of all ages are picked up at 5 a.m. and return at midday. On average, they earn ten dollars a day, or at least they did before the recent arrival of Syrian refugees drove down wages. Bourj Al Shamali is the poorest refugee camp in Lebanon, and about two thirds of the population works in agriculture. Elders who lack family support or a pension work in the fields as long as they are physically able.

Buildings separated by two or three meters.

Lost in the maze of alleys.

## Lots and Houses

Step off the few main streets, and you'll find yourself in a maze of dark alleys. Stretch your arms out: you can touch the buildings on both sides. From above, the camp looks like a beehive, or like a medieval Islamic city.<sup>13</sup> The houses are damp and receive little sunlight. But there are advantages to this unplanned density. Close buildings create shade in summer and hold heat in winter. The alleys also create a sense of intimacy and community. You will overhear conversations, music, and televisions playing inside homes as you pass by. When a stranger arrives, word gets around fast. Along with community comes a strong sense of social control.

As you walk about the camp, you'll notice the considerable variation in lot size, which mirrors the spaces staked out with tarp tents six decades ago. Refugees were assigned different tents depending on household size, from two to eight people. Some claimed larger plots of land to grow plants or raise animals, while others accepted a smaller footprint. Everyone believed the camp was temporary.

The tents afforded no privacy, no space for growing families, and little shelter from severe winters; but they stayed up for a generation, as Lebanese authorities exercised strict building controls. Toilets and bathing spaces were communally shared, and until 1968, there were no family kitchens; food rations were distributed by UNRWA. Finally, in the 1960s, sturdier buildings began to replace the tents. Walls were strengthened with stones, and later cement. Provisional zinc roofs were required for many years after that, to signal that the housing was temporary.

The stone houses that survive are the oldest dwellings in camp. Some still have the old zinc roofs, usually a sign that the inhabitants are poor. Many stone houses are concentrated in a neighborhood known as Morocco, the only district whose name does not refer to a village of origin but rather to the North African origin of the residents, whose ancestors moved to historic Palestine during the Ottoman Empire.

In the 1980s, the camp endured the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli bombing. Later, an inflow of money from the Palestinian diaspora enabled most refugees to rebuild their houses with the exposed cement bricks you see today. An informal building boom followed in the '90s, as Palestinians abroad invested money to improve the houses of their relatives or to build their own retirement homes.<sup>14</sup> Some of the exposed-brick houses were faced with a layer of cement. Most are unpainted, lost in a sea of gray, but the main street has recently been splashed with bright color to fortify a sense of local pride.

You can tell a lot about a household by the height of its building. Lot assignments have been frozen since 1955, even though some families have tripled in size and others have left the camp altogether. The only direction to expand is upwards. A typical building has three or four stories, with the sons and their families living above the parents. Columns are left exposed so that future generations can add more floors.

The highest buildings are eight stories tall, developed by investors as rental properties. Bourj Al Shamali is less dense than other camps in Lebanon, and open fields on the periphery lend it a rural feel. Nevertheless, the central core conforms to building patterns that have made Palestinian refugee camps one of the densest urban forms in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Density in Bourj Al Shamali.

Informal houses, built right on top of one another.

House awaiting another story.

## Complications of Ownership

Palestinians in Lebanon are not allowed to own real estate, and there is no mechanism to register ownership with the state. The camps have devised their own systems of legal title, and property is respected, but the deed confers ownership of the building only, not the leased land on which it stands. It is technically illegal to build in camp, or even to bring in construction materials. The effect of these prohibitions is to inflate house prices, which are higher than in the adjacent village, and to force prospective builders to pay copious bribes. Repairs and home improvements are difficult and expensive, and many houses are in disrepair.

Rents, by comparison, are cheap. Upwardly mobile refugees look for ways to move outside the camp. Nearby apartments in the village are inhabited by the Palestinian middle class: doctors, nurses, teachers, and administrators who can afford higher quality housing but want to remain close to their community and relief services like healthcare and education. This depresses rental prices within the camp, and cheap rents have attracted Syrians displaced by the civil war. Palestinian camps in Beirut have even received poor immigrants from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Philippines.

Birdcages mounted outside a home.

Toy store.

## The Young, the Old, and the Birds

You will see lots of kids in camp. More than half the population is under eighteen,<sup>16</sup> and when school gets out they play in the alleys, making up games with sticks, plastic wheels, and whatever else they can find. Older people pull plastic chairs out to the street and sit beneath hanging birdcages. As there is little space for domesticated animals, small birds are the preferred pet and are often kept at the entrance to the house.

At dusk in summer, the skies come alive. Families and groups of women visit on rooftops to escape the hot, claustrophobic streets. Doves and pigeons fly overhead, causing a great commotion. Raising birds is a popular pastime among young men, and late on weekend afternoons you hear the men whistle as they steer their flocks. Parents say that with unemployment so high, this is a great way for their sons to keep out of trouble and generate income on the side. A newborn pigeon sells for around \$10, and other species can be sold for as much as \$50.

Rooftops, with the UNRWA water tower in the distance.

## Green Space

No public gardens or squares were planned when Bourj Al Shamali was settled, and for the most part the narrow streets are the only public spaces. Scattered trees fight for life in slivers of sunlight. Local organizations lead bus trips to the sea or to the public park in Tyre, to give children a little freedom to run around and explore.

But soon Bourj Al Shamali will have its own small park. Community organizers have long tried to detach communal space from the complex web of private “ownership,” and finally they have had success.<sup>17</sup> In the center of camp is an abandoned stone house with a beautiful olive tree. The owner of this plot — a former member of the Palestinian communist party — emigrated long ago, and he has agreed to open it to the community as the first public green space.

Sundry goods store.

Bakery.

## Bakeries, Cigarettes, and Contraband

There is one sit-down restaurant in camp, serving plates of hummus, and a few falafel stores. But mainly there are bakeries. One bakery can produce up to 1000 mana'ish daily — a flatbread baked with za'atar on top. Cheese and ground meat are more expensive alternatives. On Friday and Saturday, women bring homemade toppings to add to the dough base, recalling a time when they baked bread in a communal oven. Aside from the bakeries, most people cannot afford to eat out. When the time comes to indulge in a special treat, they go for a walk in Tyre along the seaside boulevard, a 15-minute car ride away.

On the other hand, there are a surprising number of shops catering to refugees. Since storekeepers in camp don't pay taxes, they have lower prices than shops in the village. The camps are "exceptional geographies," outside the law, and with no juridical protection they tend to attract illicit trade. (As researchers put it, "The suspension of the law is not illegal but extralegal."<sup>18</sup>)

The local police do not enter Bourj Al Shamali. The community keeps public order collectively, and the elders resolve violent disputes. In the days before entrance permits were required, outsiders would come to camp for cheap goods and contraband. Cigarettes can still be bought easily here, even though only a few shops are licensed to sell tobacco. Before the recent rise of a more conservative Islam, you could get cheaper alcohol, too, but that trade has now stopped or gone underground.

Tangle of overhead wires.

## Utilities

Look up, and you will see a chaotic tangle of red, green, and blue wires running in every direction. In places, they are so thick as to create a canopy over the streets. Incredibly, power lines were intertwined with plastic water pipes until 2006, when the European Commission helped install a new water system that reduced the risk of electrocution.

Bourj Al Shamali is powered by twelve transformer stations. Power failure is common, and all but inevitable when it rains. The camp committee is negotiating with Lebanese authorities to resolve the problem, but it's hard to press for change when nobody has paid for electricity in years. (It's not clear when exactly the camp stopped paying the utility bills, but it appears that no one has come to collect payments in at least 10 or 15 years.) Now the influx of Syrians has increased electricity use, while the camp has suffered a decrease in amperes.

The frail, exposed wires can spark fires, but emergency vehicles are often unable to penetrate the narrow camp streets. In May 2015, a house burned at the edge of the camp, and Lebanese firefighters were able to reach it from the back of the UNRWA school. It was a wakeup call for the camp committee, which realized it couldn't count on such luck in the future. That led to the formation of a local volunteer fire department, overseen by fire wardens scattered across camp. The local firefighters have transformed a shopping trolley into a fire engine by stocking it with handheld fire extinguishers, and have begun distributing extinguishers to households.

Street posters of "martyrs" who have fought in the conflict.

Street posters of political leaders and fighters.

## Symbols and Territories

All around camp you see signs of past battles and wars. Bullets and shrapnel scar the buildings, while posters of political leaders and "martyrs" cover walls and billboards. Many posters depict young men with guns, along with emblems that convey allegiances and loyalties. These mark the territories of political factions.<sup>19</sup> Fatah dominates in camp, and even today you can find images of Yasser Arafat, from retro posters of the young Palestinian leader in dashing sunglasses to painted murals of the PNA president as an old man. You'll also see the yellow flags of Hezbollah and posters of Hamas leaders. Images of Bashar Assad have begun to appear. A recent concern is the possibility that Da'esh (ISIS) could infiltrate the camp and threaten community equilibrium, since the camp contains a few Palestinian Shia families as well as one Christian family.

But militant idols are not the only, or even the most important, symbols. Humanitarian organizations *always* sign their works. When you pass the water tank, the medical clinic, or the school, you'll see azure signs bearing the olive wreath and globe of the UN logo. For over sixty years, UNRWA has been a kind of surrogate state, offering the services of a welfare government and legal recognition of Palestinians' unique status.<sup>20</sup> Other signs testify to the European Commission's financing of the new sewage and stormwater infrastructure. Each party's contribution is registered to the last penny: EU, Denmark, Japan, Germany, Sweden, Spain. Look for signs posted by the Norwegian organization that funded the computer lab in Beit Atfal Assomoud, the Japanese organization that paid for the dental clinic, the Spanish organization that launched a vocational center to train young refugees as electricians, plumbers, and barbers.

These signs code the camp as a "paradoxical space."<sup>21</sup> The politics of humanitarianism enable leaders to treat the refugee situation as forever temporary, and thus perpetuate the camp's informality, even as they invest in infrastructure and housing upgrades that make the camp more permanent in real terms.



Aerial view of Bourj Al Shamali, taken from a helium-filled balloon.

Balloon mapping the camp.

## Cosmopolitanism

Summer is a busy season in Bourj Al Shamali. Emigres return to visit and sometimes to marry within the refugee community. (That can be a problem, as this relatively homogeneous community has high levels of Thalassemia, an inherited blood disorder.) Locals plan family celebrations around these homecoming visits. If you are there in summer, you will see parties with loud music and brightly dressed women, and at least a few extravagant weddings.

At such times, the camp seems almost cosmopolitan. You will meet returning emigres who live in Germany or Sweden, volunteers from Canada and the United States, representatives from donor nations, and the international staff of the relief agencies. You might even see a young band of bagpipe players rehearsing in the streets with their Italian (!) teachers.<sup>22</sup> Facebook and Twitter are as ubiquitous here as anywhere else. Young people wear Che Guevara t-shirts, and their parents watch Turkish soap operas. These are constant reminders that, despite its borders, the camp is open to the world.<sup>23</sup>

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### Authors' Note

This essay is playfully based on the book *Urban Code: 100 Lessons for Understanding the City*, by Anne Mikoleit & Moritz Pürckhauer (and MIT Press, 2011) and is indebted to long conversations with Mahmoud Al Joumma “Abu Wassim” and the many people in Bourj Al Shamali who have throughout the years welcomed me into their homes. I would like to express my grateful thanks to readers of earlier versions of this essay, especially Richard Wittman, as well as Marianne Potvin, Rosemary Sayigh, Hassan Ismae’l Sheikh, and Antolin Martinez de Frutos.

## Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “[Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increase](#),” press release, June 18, 2015. 
2. As of January 31, 2016, there were 1,067,785 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, [according to the UNHCR](#) (with the caveat that UNHCR Lebanon temporarily suspended new registration in May 2015, on the instructions of the Lebanese government). As of July 1, 2014, there were about 450,000 refugees [registered with UNRWA](#) in Lebanon; 53 percent live in the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps. 
3. Geographer Romola Sanyal has argued that “there is a prominent silence in urban studies on the question of refugees. ... In policy circles discussions on refugees are largely confined to humanitarian relief, living conditions in camps and the role of [UN agencies]. ... While there appears to be an emerging consensus that refugee spaces are increasingly becoming ‘slumlike’ or mimicking cities, the lens of critical urban studies that carefully interrogates the relationship between ‘slums’ and urbanity is tragically missing in this case.” See Romola Sanyal, “Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (March 2014), 558-72. 
4. David Remnick reported on the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, in a fascinating article, “[City of the Lost](#),” *The New Yorker*, August 26, 2013. Notable recent articles include Talia Radford, “[Refugee Camps Are the ‘Cities of Tomorrow,’ Says Humanitarian-Aid Expert](#),” *Dezeen*, November 23, 2015, and Elizabeth Dunn, “[The Failure of Refugee Camps](#),” *Boston Review*, September 28, 2015. 
5. Alternate transliterations include Burj Al Shamali, Borj El Shamali, Borj El Shemali, and Burj El Chemali. 
6. For more on the term “city-camp,” see Michel Agier, “Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps,” *Ethnography*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (September 2002), 317-41. For more on the population of Bourj Al Shamali, see Fiorella Larissa Erni, “Tired of Being a Refugee: Young Palestinians in Lebanon,” *eCahiers de l’Institut ePapers* No. 17 (Geneva: The Graduate Institute, 2013), and UNRWA, “[Camp Profiles: Burj Shemali Camp](#).” Refugees first arrived in 1948, but they were originally dispersed among various sites in the area. The current footprint of the camp was established in 1955. 
7. Charlie Hailey, *Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 1. 
8. Fatah, formerly the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, is a leading secular Palestinian political party and the largest faction of the confederated multi-party Palestine Liberation Organization. 
9. For a discussion of this term, see Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (2005), 147-58. 
10. Giorgio Agamben, quoted in Hailey, 8. 
11. For more on the map as a symbol celebrated by both Israelis and Palestinians, see Yair Wallach, “Trapped in Mirror-Images: The Rhetoric of Maps in Israel/Palestine,” *Political Geography*, Vol. 30, No. 7 (September 2011), 358-69. 

12. For further detail, see Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979) and *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Books, 1994). 
13. See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City: Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 19, No. 2 (1987), 155-76. 
14. Hassan Ismae'l Sheikh, "An Urbanity of Exile: Palestinian Refugee Camps," *A10: New European Architecture*, No. 27 (May-June 2009), 60-62. 
15. Ibid. 
16. Bourj Al Shamali is not unique in this respect. Half of the displaced people worldwide are children. See UNHCR, "Worldwide Displacement," op cit. 
17. Disclosure: I have been involved with these efforts, through the organization Greening Bourj Al Shamali. 
18. Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005). 
19. Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009). 
20. Romola Sanyal, op cit., paraphrasing Randa Farah, "UNRWA: Through the Eyes of Its Refugee Employees in Jordan," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 28, Nos. 2-3 (2009): 389-411. 
21. Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2011). 
22. Melinda Newman, "[Band Practice for Refugees](#)," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 2010. See also the band's [Facebook page](#). 
23. Further reading: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Camp?" in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Michel Agier, "[Corridors of Exile: A Worldwide Web of Camps](#)," *Metropolitiques*, November 25, 2011; Sari Hanafi, "[Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon as a Space of Exception](#)," *REVUE Asylon(s)*, No. 5 (September 2008); Manuel Herz, Ed., with ETH-Studio Basel, *From Camp to City: Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara*, (Baden: Lars Mueller, 2013); Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman, *Architecture after Revolution* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014); Romola Sanyal, "Squatting in Camps: Building and Insurgency in Spaces of Refuge," *Urban Studies* Vol. 48, No. 5 (2011), 877-90; Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, (London: Verso, 2011); Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, Ed. Richard Sennett (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969). 

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