

***WENNER-GREN FOUNDATION GRANT PROPOSAL***

**Psychosocial Authority: The Absence of Legitimacy in the Education System  
of Syrian Refugees in Za'atari, Jordan**

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### ***Education in Za’atari: Background***

The focus of my investigation is the education of Syrian refugees in Za’atari, Jordan. Before exploring the anthropological mechanics of my research, perhaps it is best to give some background. Za’atari is a refugee camp with an area of about three square miles in the outskirts of Amman that provides asylum for those displaced by the Syrian Civil War. An estimated 82,818 Syrian refugees reside in the camp (UNHCR Syria Refugee Response Information Sharing Portal), of which approximately 30,000 are school-aged (ages 6-17) (ESWG 2014:11).

There are two basic types of education in the camp: “formal education” and “informal education” (IFE). Formal education is akin to standardized public education. There are three formal schools in Za’atari, all of which are attributed to donations from philanthropic organizations in the Gulf (ESWG 2014:11). Courses in formal schools include math, Islamic education, Arabic, English, social and national education, and science (ESWG 2013:3). Informal education, on the other hand, is provided by NGOs operating in Za’atari, in addition to mosques in the camp. The chief purpose of IFE is “to provide alternative education opportunities for children who are unable or unwilling to go to [formal] school”, although many children receive both formal and informal education (ESWG 2014:20). There are multiple types of IFE, including religious education (mostly conducted in mosques), basic learning (literacy or math classes), vocational training, and recreational activities (ESWG 2014:46).

In a study conducted in September, 2014, the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) of the 2014 Syrian Regional Response Plan (Jordan RRP6) found that 61.4% of school-aged

children in Za’atari receive one or both forms of education.<sup>1</sup> 51.6% attend formal schools; 9.8% of children attend informal programs exclusively. 38.6% do not receive any sort of education.

One of the chief aspects of the education system in Za’atari – and of the Jordanian education program for all Syrian refugees more broadly – is psychosocial support. Both the Jordanian government and NGOs in the country are acutely aware of the prevalence of psychological trauma within the Syrian refugee population, owing to the stresses of war and displacement (MPIC 2013:47). In response to this social dilemma, there are ongoing efforts to train teachers to deal with students’ psychosocial needs (UN 2014:51), to increase the capacity of psychosocial case management (UN 2014:21), and to provide disabled students with access to specialized psychologists (ESWG 2014:23). For the most part, psychosocial support programs exist within the informal education sector.

### ***Objective***

I propose to research education in Za’atari as a form of governmental authority. My hypothesis is that the psychosocial component of the system acts as a mode of authority without any reference to governmental legitimacy.

### ***Governance of Za’atari as anthropology of the state***

The theoretical framework of my study is anthropology of the state. Of course, as a refugee camp, Za’atari is not a standard case study of the modern nation-state. Refugees are by

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<sup>1</sup> RRP6 is an umbrella program headed by the UN Refugee Agency through which the Jordanian government and NGOs coordinate with each other in order to efficiently administer the Syria refugee population. The Plan is divided into eight sectors, or “working groups”: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Cash, Education, Food Security, Health, Non-Food Items (NFIs), Protection, and Shelter (UN 2014:2).

definition not citizens of their host countries, and thus do not occupy the traditional Hobbesian binary of sovereign and subject. For although the Jordanian government does technically possess sovereign power over the residents of Za’atari, the nature of this power is entirely different from that over Jordanian citizens.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, Syrian refugees are, at least theoretically, temporary visitors. The duration of their stay is obviously unclear, but the prevailing assumption is that they will eventually return to Syria to “rebuild their country” (UN 2014:65). This makes Jordan more of a steward, or “host,” than a sovereign power.

Furthermore, in governing Syrian refugees, all levels of the Jordanian government are currently coordinating with and often delegating authority to nongovernmental actors.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Za’atari, the Syrian Refugee Camp Directorate (SCRD) – a branch of the Jordanian government – has worked “in close cooperation” with the UNHCR to develop and implement a strategy for municipal governance of the camp (UNHCR 2014:2). This voluntary dispersal of power goes directly against the norms of Westphalian sovereignty.

Yet despite the incoherent political link between the Jordanian government and Syrian refugees, refugee camps like Za’atari can still be explored through the lens of anthropology of the state. Indeed, the untraditional position of Za’atari within the state may in fact prove useful to understanding the general dynamics of statist politics. In order to appreciate the conventional anthropological functions of the state, sometimes it is necessary to observe how they operate in unconventional domains.

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<sup>2</sup> The Jordanian government is not a signatory of the Convention (1951) or the Protocol (1967) Relating to the Status of Refugees, therefore its dominion over Syrian refugees is not subject to international law.

<sup>3</sup> Conducted under the framework of Jordan RRP6.

### *Legitimacy in contemporary anthropology*

One of these functions is legitimacy. For the purposes of this proposal, I take legitimacy to mean the popular belief amongst a given populace in its government's right to rule. While most classical political scientists and sociologists have seen national legitimacy as essential to the survival of modern nation-states, numerous contemporary scholars have challenged this notion, arguing that political subjects do not necessarily have to "believe" in the worthiness of governmental authority. Indeed, some case studies have found legitimacy to be mostly absent from the equation of national politics.

One such study is Lisa Wedeen's analysis of the cult of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad (1999). As the leader of Syria from 1971 to his death in 2000, Asad made claims to legitimacy that were unquestionably ridiculous. The official rhetoric of his regime was that he motivated by "divine prescription" (38), enjoyed overwhelming popular support, possessed superhuman political savvy, and was immortal. The regime would often reinforce these absurd assertions through public "spectacles." These mandatory, state-run events – e.g. opening festivals, referendum celebrations, or state holiday rituals (2) – would employ images, language, and symbols so as to refine and propagate ideas of Asad's supremacy.

Although Syrians did not believe the political messages transmitted by public spectacles, these occasions nonetheless pointed to and strengthened the dominance of the regime over the population. "In other words, while the literal statements of the cult [were] frequently clearly preposterous, the dominance to which they refer (and which they also help produce) is implicit in the regime's demands of public dissimulation and in people's conformity to them" (12). As such, "Asad's cult [was] a strategy of domination based on compliance rather than legitimacy" (6).

The case of mid-twentieth-century Gaza also defies traditional assumptions about legitimacy. In her research on the governance of Gaza under the British Mandate (1917-1948) and the Egyptian Administration (1948-1967), Llana Feldman (2008) found that legitimacy was not only absent from these regimes' political strategies; it was contradictory to them. Because the compliance of Palestinians with both of these governments rested on the notion of the regimes' impermanence, "any sustained claim to legitimacy was almost certain to fail" (17). Thus, paradoxically, the right of Mandate and Administration to rule largely rested on the reflexive acknowledgment of their *illegitimacy*.

Not only do these two theories defy the long-held belief that governmental authority requires legitimacy, they also each provide distinct alternative models for how a state can function without it. Whereas Asad's regime achieved dominance chiefly through Foucaultian disciplinary techniques (Wedeen 1999:18-24), the Mandate and Administration mostly relied on bureaucratic authority (Feldman 2008:14-17). That each of these cases is so unique indicates that there may be a broad diversity of types of governmental authority that can operate without or distinctly from legitimacy.

### ***Legitimacy and education***

The modern education system is an ideal domain to explore the question of legitimacy. In the scheme of the state, education is the most direct method of subject positioning within the "space of the civic" (Feldman 2008: 190). Put differently, the main goal of education is to mold students – through discourse, incentive structures, and discipline – into model citizens, such that they obey and enforce social norms within the political sphere. In this way, the education system is a manner of statist domination, as students are subjected to the "demands of propriety"

(Feldman 2008: 190).<sup>4</sup> In evaluating the role of legitimacy in a given state, it is highly useful to scrutinize its education system and determine whether or not these proprietary demands reflexively refer to the right of the government to rule.

In most cases they do. In liberal democracies, for example, the liberal political norms ingrained into students are likewise the moral validation of the liberal political economy that subjects inhabit. The civic virtues of justice and meritocratic work ethic – both promoted via liberal education – serve as the ethical bases of democratic rule and capitalist economics, respectively.

However, education systems can also operate without directly justifying the authority of the government. Students can be taught to be productive, compliant political subjects with little reference to national legitimacy. For instance, Feldman (2008) argued that the Gazan education systems of the Mandate and Administration were parts of these regimes' broader strategies to avoid legitimacy in Gaza, in that "the demands of propriety... could appear to be social rather than governmental demands, distracting attention away from the very regimes which were imposing it" (Feldman 2008: 191).

### ***Hypothesis: Psychosocial authority***

Drawing from the ideas of Wedeen and Feldman, I hypothesize that the education system of Syrian refugees in Jordan does not invoke the legitimacy of the Jordanian government, or that of the NGOs with which it shares power. By giving primacy to psychosocial methods, the education system avoids the topics of nationhood and citizenship, as they may be upsetting to refugees. The demands of propriety revolve around the psychology of the individual instead of

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this proposal, "subjection" should be understood both as political control and as construction of political identity (Foucault 1982:781).

the public sphere of the state, making them “appear to be social rather than governmental demands.” Like this, the education system portrays itself as humanitarian, not legitimate.

Such is not to say there are not humanitarian motivations behind psychosocial education. Humanitarianism is not some sort of conspiracy. Policy-makers and civil servants alike within the education system are undoubtedly driven by humanitarian concerns.

Yet from the perspective of anthropology of the state, we also need to look at psychosocial education as a means of subject formation. Though Syrian refugees are expected to ultimately repatriate, the Jordanian government is well aware of the protracted nature of the Syrian Civil War, and intends to educate Syrian refugees such that they are “able to contribute to Jordan’s development through a knowledge economy” (MPIC 2014:36).

The effectiveness of a modern welfare state such as Jordan is largely dependent on the skills and production its inhabitants bring to its market economy. In this sense, its ideal subject is the certifiably skilled, productive professional. Humanitarianism aside, the reason there is such emphasis on the psychological wellbeing of the refugee population is that depression, trauma, and emotional instability go directly against this version of civic propriety. Psychosocial education may be a humanitarian effort of the civil servant, but it is likewise a governmental strategy to the state; one from which the notion of legitimacy is absent.

### ***Necessary Evidence and Methodology***

In order to prove this preliminary theory, I must demonstrate that psychosocial educational services of refugees aim to and do alter the political identity of the subject towards the realm of psychology and away from nationhood and citizenship. I hope to provide evidence

of this anthropological phenomenon through classroom observations, interviews, and official literature of psychosocial educational procedures.

Classroom observations are imperative, as the interactions between the teacher and the student personify the interplay between governmental authority and subject formation. Unfortunately access to classrooms may prove problematic, as several teachers in Za'atari have complained about the high number of visitors in classrooms (ESWG 2013:3). Hopefully I will gain access to multiple sites of psychosocial educational services over an extended period of time.

Interviews of both students and teachers are crucial. Given the somewhat metaphysical character of my research, questions must be carefully designed. Some of the themes I must inquire about are: the perceived future of Syrian refugees, teachers' and students' understandings of propriety and civic values, and students' ideas of the "pursuit of happiness" within and with respect to the space of the civic.

The official documents I will need access to include curriculum, classroom procedures, and teacher training, all with respect to psychosocial treatment. These will help me to understand the specific goals and strategies of the educational subject formation of Syrian refugees.

Just as important as the above methods are the relationships I will forge while in Za'atari. In order to truly appreciate the political identities of refugee students, I must get to know them personally. This means going beyond objective observations and interviews and spending time with the kids in a casual context. It also requires that I make more than one visit to Za'atari. Ideally, I would like to make three separate visits, each three to four weeks in length, spread out over two to three years.

### *Prior Experience*

Majoring in political science at the School of Arts and Sciences in Tufts University, my chief academic interest has been political anthropology. As a senior, I conducted an independent study on the cognitive anthropology of “rationalist politics,” and also attended an anthropology seminar on theories of the state. These two academic pursuits have allowed me to study and analyze a high volume and wide variety of anthropological literature.

In addition to my knowledge of political anthropology, I also have ample exposure to the social realities of refugee education, specifically in Za’atari. During my junior year at Tufts (2013-2014), I took part in a yearlong, multidisciplinary course on the Middle East and North Africa that is run by the Tufts Institute for Global Leadership (IGL). One of the main topics of program was the Syrian refugee crisis. Not only did I read about the subject extensively, I also was able to discuss it with scholars and humanitarian workers who are directly involved in Syrian wartime emigration through field research and international aid programs, respectively.

Two of the professionals I conversed with – Dr. Curt Rhodes and Mr. Mike Niconchuk – were employees of Questscope, an international NGO that primarily operates in Za’atari. Questscope’s mission, in Za’atari and elsewhere in the Middle East, is to provide (informal) education to underprivileged children, namely disadvantaged Syrian refugees. Through EPIIC I had the fortune of listening to a talk by Curt Rhodes, the founder of the organization, about the strategy and implementation of his program. I also had the privilege of attending two discussion groups about refugee education in Za’atari, both led by Mr. Niconchuk. Dr. Rhodes was present and active in the first of the two sessions.

These interactive events helped me to understand the challenges of education in Za'atari. These difficulties include, but are not limited to: budgetary and resource constraints (both those of education programs and of Syrian families), safety issues in the camp, widespread depression, tendencies towards Islamic extremism and/or martyrdom, establishing relationships between teachers and students, lack of social cohesion in the camp, accounting for lost months/years of educational development and accreditation amongst Syrian children, and providing a sense of normalcy for students. From an anthropological standpoint, all of these factors make education in Za'atari a precarious, dynamic, diverse, and ever-evolving domain of politics.

Although my skill-level in Arabic is elementary, I am currently attending a yearlong, intensive Arabic course.

All told, I would argue that my knowledge of the education system in Za'atari, combined with my fluency in political anthropology, makes me a great candidate.

### ***Topicality of research***

The post-Cold War era of international relations has been characterized by intra-state conflict and inter-state migration. Refugee populations have grown exponentially in the past quarter century, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Much research has been devoted to the traumatic effects of war and displacement on refugees in the fields of sociology and psychology, but much less exists in the field of anthropology of the state.

It is not my intent to discredit or ignore the moral value of and urgent need for psychosocial education to refugees. However, I do believe there is room to analyze these services through the lens of political anthropology. Psychosocial treatment does not just alter the psychology of the subject, but also her political identity.

Refugee populations are not going anywhere anytime soon. In many ways, their exponential growth is representative of our age, as they are symptomatic both of the contemporary crisis of the Western nation-state and of globalization. Given that so much attention is being paid to their psychology in the global political arena, perhaps this could bring about a new kind of “global citizen,” one who is not subject to the legitimacy of any particular nation-state. Such is a possibility that I believe deserves further anthropological exploration.

**ESIMATED BUDGET**

- **Airfare (3 round trips from U.S. to Amman): \$5,000**
- **Living Expenses (3 visits, each 3-4 weeks): \$5,000**
- **Payment of personal translator: \$7,000**
- **Visa: \$170**

**Total: \$17,170**

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**ESWG:** Education Sector Working Group

**IF:** Informal education

**Jordan RRP6:** 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan: Jordan

**MPIC:** Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation