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Refugees in abject spaces, protracted 'waiting' and spatialities of abjection during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with a reinterpretation of the concept of abject space situating it within abjection theory and the concept of 'waiting'. It develops further the term of 'spatialities of abjection' and discusses how the complex relationality occurring in abjection manifests in various spaces, through porous, changing, invisible boundaries but also specific temporal conditions. Doing so allows us to unpack the transformations of the abject space alternatively and simultaneously considered as a refuge and as a place of danger, factor of contamination. More importantly, the paper situates the reading of spatial abjection through a temporal lens, denoting how abject subjects are spatialized in a context of 'political waiting' but more importantly in a situation where active 'waiting' re-shifted to passive 'waiting' because of the pandemic implications. To do so, we focus on the spatialities of abjection affecting Syrian refugees living in informal tented settlements (ITSs) in Lebanon during the COVID-19 crisis. While abjection, stigma and xenophobia were already occurring prior to 2019, ITSs as abject spaces and refugees as abject subjects were targeted by supplemented rules and control. Those led to more controlled encampments and immobilization, increasing their dependency and reliance on international aid.

Refugiados en Espacios Abyectos, 'Esperas' Prolongadas y Espacialidades de Abyección durante la Pandemia del COVID-19

RESUMEN

Este artículo involucra una reinterpretación del concepto de espacio abyecto situándolo dentro de la teoría de la abyección y el concepto de 'espera'. Desarrolla aún más el término 'espacialidades de la abyección' y discute cómo la compleja relacionalidad que ocurre en la abyección se manifiesta en varios espacios, a través de fronteras porosas, cambiantes e invisibles, pero también de condiciones temporales específicas. Hacerlo nos permite desempacar las transformaciones del espacio abyecto alternativa y simultáneamente considerado como refugio y como lugar de peligro, factor de contaminación. Más importante aún, el artículo sitúa la lectura de la abyección espacial a través de una lente

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temporal, denotando cómo los sujetos abyectos se espacializan en un contexto de ‘espera política’, pero más importante aún en una situación en la que la ‘espera’ activa cambia a ‘espera’ pasiva debido a las implicaciones de la pandemia. Para ello, nos enfocamos en las espacialidades de abyección que afectan a los refugiados sirios que viven en asentamientos informales de tiendas de campaña (ITS por sus siglas en inglés) en el Líbano durante la crisis del COVID-19. Si bien la abyección, el estigma y la xenofobia ya estaban ocurriendo antes de 2019, los ITS como espacios abyectos y los refugiados como sujetos abyectos fueron objeto de normas y controles suplementarios. Estos llevaron a campamentos más controlados e inmovilización, aumentando su dependencia a la ayuda internacional.

Réfugiés dans des espaces abjects, « attentes » prolongées et spatialités de l’abjection pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article va à la rencontre d’une réinterprétation du concept d’espace abject pour le situer au sein de la théorie de l’abjection et le concept de l’« attente ». Il approfondit le terme « spatialités de l’abjection » et présente la manière dont la dimension relationnelle complexe qui se produit dans l’abjection se manifeste dans des espaces variés, à travers des barrières poreuses, changeantes et invisibles mais aussi par le biais de modalités temporelles spécifiques. Cela permet d’analyser les transformations de l’espace abject qui est tour à tour et simultanément considéré comme un refuge ou comme un lieu dangereux, un facteur de contamination. Plus particulièrement, l’article situe la lecture de l’abjection spatiale à travers un prisme temporel, et souligne la façon dont les sujets abjects sont spatialisés dans un contexte d’« attente politique » mais, ce qui est plus important, dans une situation dans laquelle l’« attente » active est redevenue une « attente » passive à cause des implications de la pandémie. Pour ce faire, nous focalisons sur les spatialités de l’abjection touchant les réfugiés syriens qui vivent dans des campements informels (appelés informal tented settlements, ou ITS) au Liban pendant la crise de COVID-19. Bien que l’abjection, la stigmatisation et la xénophobie aient été déjà là avant la pandémie, les campements informels en tant qu’espaces abjects et les réfugiés en tant que personnes abjectes étaient la cible de règles et de contrôles supplémentaires. Cela a mené à des camps plus contrôlés et à l’immobilisation, ce qui a augmenté la dépendance et le recours à l’aide internationale.

Whereas the nature, status, living conditions and socio-economic characteristics of refugees differ greatly, a common denominator is their situation of ‘waiting’, of being in a state of limbo (Moawad, 2020, 2022) due to multiple conditions making them ‘stuck’ (Chatty & Mansour, 2011) in both space and time. The majority of refugees endure a protracted refugee situation, meaning that they have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years and in very precarious conditions in either camps or informal tented settlements (ITSs). They find themselves in a situation of deep uncertainty,

enduring collective anxiety due to 'political waiting', which is a consequence of external geopolitical forces. This exerted power creates a form of 'stuckness' (Hage, 2009), where being stuck is being trapped, immobilized and confined. The issue of refugees' encampments has been extensively debated. Scholars have often drawn on Agamben's (2005) theorization of the camp as a space of exception to understand detention, asylum and deportation as spaces that produce a suspension of individuals' rights (Agier, 2011; Oesch, 2017; Pfeifer, 2018). Such understanding of 'camps' as spaces of pure bare life has been criticized though, due to its highly political nature (refer to Hanafi, 2008; Martin, 2015; Oesch, 2017).

Isin and Rygiel (2007) called to move beyond the exception narrative to investigate the more contemporary features of camps often created with the intent of protecting the displaced and keeping them simultaneously away from both danger and state territories. Taking a step away from the sole logic of alienation of human rights, they used the concept of 'abject space' and apply it to either frontiers, zones or camps. They develop their argument around abject spaces as spaces of politics; such spaces employ 'different strategies to reduce people to abject inexistence, not only creating varying conditions of rightlessness but also making different logics and acts of resistance possible' (Isin & Rygiel, 2007, p. 185). Furthermore, they also insist on their additional role, for some, as spaces of refuge. Interestingly enough, the authors did not engage further with the concept of 'abjection' (Butler, 1993; Kristeva, 1982) which is still primarily used in gendered-related debates (Bousfield, 2000; Monahan, 2017; Russell, 2017). As such, little is known about the significance of the 'spatialities of abjection' (Robinson, 2000) characterizing protracted refugees in ITSS. In other words, there is a need to understand heterogeneous spatialities enabling transformation of the 'abject' and testifying from the diverse nature and openness of space (Massey, 1995) along with its politically transformative nature (Robinson, 2000). This paper aims to fill this gap by unwrapping such spatialities of abjection in the context of protracted refugees facing what is noted as 'political waiting'. Doing so contributes to unpacking further the concept of 'waiting' in the cultural and social geography field feeding into debates on the state of protracted and perpetual 'waiting' and the condition of 'stuckness' (Hage, 2009). ITSS settlements are here understood as abject spaces and specifically zones, 'where special rules and laws apply, (. . .) nested within state and city territories' (Isin & Rygiel, 2007, p. 193).

While the refugees' protracted living conditions and their spatialities of abjection deserve full attention, the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis led to supplemental calls to conduct research in the area (Ho & Maddrell, 2021). The pandemic triggered a range of preventive and defensive mechanisms directed towards the most vulnerable communities in contexts where the planned and the unplanned coexist on an everyday basis (Wilkinson et al., 2020; Moawad and Andres, 2020a; Moawad & Andres, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) regulations were subjectively interpreted and translated into severe lockdown mechanisms, similar to those applied in townships or slums (Nyashanu et al., 2020). The measures linked to restricting mobilities, including those applicable to encampments, were connected to a negative perception towards those spaces and the individuals living in them as unhealthy and dirty, hence posing a health risk. Such an image marginalized residents of informal settlements further (Nyashanu et al., 2020). COVID-19 increased the social stigma and social isolation of urban refugees (United Nations, 2020). This was enforced by the narrative that the virus was perceived 'as

imported, coming from either foreigners or nationals that travelled abroad, making the population and authorities suspicious of foreigners including refugees' (Bukuluki et al., 2020, p. 2).

This paper seeks to deconstruct how the rapid preventive measures implemented in response to the spread of COVID-19 towards Syrian ITSs in Lebanon were used for the control and subordination of refugees around a narrative of fear. It is framed upon an understanding of the spatialities of abjection through two main lenses: a multi-scalar approach where 'space' as a recipient and a location influences mechanisms of abjection, and a temporal approach in how long-term 'political waiting' is exercised and imposed. It is structured as follows. The first section engages with the concepts of abjection and spatialities of abjection in the context of ITSs and 'political waiting'. The second section presents the methodology of research while the third engages with the wider context of ITSs, Syrian refugees and COVID-19 responses in Lebanon. The fourth section unwraps the spatialities of abjection that materialize through an 'inside' and the 'outside' and a changing relation to the 'other'. This leads us to a discussion on the relational complexity of spatialities of abjection in contexts of protracted 'waiting'. The paper concludes by denoting the significance of the paper for the field of social geography and demonstrating how abject spaces can be transformed due to a passive 'waiting', immobilities and a search for refuge.

Abjection, spatiality of abjections and 'political waiting'

Abjection is triggered by a process of disturbance in a context outside specific borders, positions and rules (Butler, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). Abjection includes anything that 'disturbs identity and system order' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). As Jones et al. note (Jones et al., 2021), Kristeva drew upon the work of Douglas (1966) on dirt which preconfigured the spatial nature of abjection linked to a process of contamination. Both embrace the idea of boundaries as key arbitrary lines for maintaining contamination from 'matters out of place' (Douglas, 1966), hence fostering abjection. Abjection is thus 'a form of semiotic relation' which 'has been associated (. . .) with the exclusion of others, and the drawing of boundaries to effect social and spatial purifications' (Robinson, 2000, p. 296). This semiotic relationality is eminently spatialized; it rests upon fluid demarcations that evolve in 'unstable territories' embracing both ambiguity and anger (Robinson, 2000). Fear, disgust and abjection result from this process of demarcation and for Kristeva (1982, p. 68) it varies in both space and time.

Demarcation resonates with the concept of 'spatiality of abjection' as this is 'precisely about the persistent failure of borders, distinctions and separations' (Robinson, 2000, p. 296). Such spatialities are enablers of transformation and do also connect with the issue of stigma (Jones et al., 2021; Tyler, 2020). The commonality between abjection and stigma has recently been discussed from a spatial planning perspective by Jones et al. (2021) reiterating the relevancy of the abjection framing to unwrap the process of stigmatization on 'places'. Spatialities of abjection as noted by Robinson (2000, p. 297) are heterogeneous and can involve 'alternative spatialities that coexist with and shape the character of the space/s of the symbolic'. This has important relevance when applied to the spatial setting inhabited by protracted refugees, typically ITSs and their specific physical characteristics, with no physical borders per se but invisible 'perceived' boundaries. This gets

us back to the term of 'abject space' (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) where the spatialities of abjection reflect a paradox between the 'place' being very visible (visually) but the refugees living in those spaces being rendered invisible and inaudible. This occurs as a result of abjection and hence on-purpose exclusion intrinsically connected to the protracted situation, their status as refugees and the 'political waiting' they are facing.

Sibley (1995) argues that abjection relies on considering the abject person as someone who fundamentally does not fit within existing social and spatial orders and hence is invisible from a collective ethical responsibility (see also, Kristeva, 1982; Murphy 2006, as cited in Monahan, 2017). Abjection, by its connection to bordering, suggests a relational approach to the non-belonging highly embedded within the 'political waiting' that refugees typically face. Lubkeman (2008, as cited in Brun et al., 2017, p. 221) considers that the forced migrant is often viewed as a victim of modern life, 'a person who belongs somewhere else, and has been uprooted from some place to which he or she is expected to return'. This exclusionary process of the socially abject is used in legitimizing dominant mechanisms for the provision of order (Tyler, 2013), typically enforcement of border controls and use of mechanisms of surveillance to intensify control (Monahan, 2017).

As noted by Tyler (2013), social abjection theoretically helps consideration of the process of exclusion that takes place on the margins and in so-called 'abject spaces'. This refers back to Isin and Rygiel's (2007) points on demarcation and dynamics of protection inherent to refugees in ITSs; those spaces appear to be embedded in this spatio-temporal condition informed by the protracted waiting situation lived by refugees. This is linked to the 'political waiting' which to date has not been associated with the spatio-temporal dynamics of abjection. 'Waiting' is the common denominator experienced and lived by all displaced refugees and is studied not only as a social agent or a state policy but also as a manifestation of imposed sedentarism (Moawad, 2022). The two core conditions of 'waiting', noted as active 'waiting' and passive 'waiting', are highly impacted by the imposed 'political waiting'. Active 'waiting' alleviates refugees' anxiety and is induced when passive 'waiting' is infused with activeness and productiveness (Jeffrey, 2010). In the pre-COVID-19 period, Syrian refugees enacted an active and productive 'waiting' that was revealed in the manifestation of socio-spatial coping mechanisms such as a continuous spatial reappropriation of their ITSs, informal labour opportunities and accessibility to basic services. COVID-19 measurements deactivated their 'waiting', transforming it into passive 'waiting' in restricting their mobilities with a reinforced 'stuckness' (Hage, 2009). It is through this lens that this paper explores the modalities of spatial abjections associated with the preventive measures implemented in response to the spread of COVID-19. Spatial abjections are scrutinized through their multi-scalar implications, at a micro-level (shelters and ITSs), a macro-level (the town and beyond) and their temporal 'waiting' dynamics.

Methods

Data used for this paper are drawn out of an intensive study during the pandemic which included the collection of secondary data from March 2020, e.g., from national and local policies, governmental bodies, United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports and online interviews with 15 'knowledge' holders' representatives between August and October 2020. From November 2020, we continued collecting

secondary data and monitoring the situation of COVID-19 in ITSs, particularly in the Beqaa Governorate area which hosts the highest number of ITSs. Knowledge and understanding of the pre-pandemic context is built upon a large-scale research study conducted between October 2019 and February 2020 which included 58 face-to-face interviews with representatives from national governments, host communities, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and NGOs, along with 108 interviews with refugees in the same region. This previous fieldwork helped understanding the context and the differences with the pre-pandemic situation; it focused on how ITSs functioned, on refugees' living conditions and the control, support and governance mechanisms already in place. The network built during the previous research allowed the authors to identify interviewees able to provide an overarching view on ITSs and pandemic preparedness and response plans across the country, along with measures taken towards refugees, their everyday living conditions, behaviours and repercussions. Participants were contacted through email or phone and the shift towards remote interviewing occurred very smoothly in a context of lockdowns where work and socializing patterns had already shifted online. The use of videos facilitated the process in establishing direct contact between the researchers and the interviewees.

All interviews were translated (when performed in Arabic language), transcribed and coded. A total of 13 codes emerged from the intensive COVID-19 research including the following themes: the encampment process, power and control mechanisms, health preventive measures, self-governance, provision of aid, accessibility and mobility, fear and stigmatization. These linked back to how pandemic preparedness and response plans were set up, implemented and with what consequences on refugees and host communities. Through an interpretative approach, we decrypted the interviewees' detailed lived experiences and knowledge and cross-referenced and compared them with the secondary sources. The critical issue was to unwrap what differed for protracted refugees within the pandemic emergency and what was a continuum of the pre-COVID-19 context. To contextualize this, we turn now to a short overview of the situation in Lebanon in regard to the Syrian crisis, ITSs, the pre-pandemic context and how this constituted path-dependent conditions for further abjection.

Contextualizing the modalities of pandemic-led spatial abjections

Lebanon has been characterized by a constant influx of internally displaced people and refugees since the beginning of the twentieth century. An unprecedented situation arose with the Syrian crisis in 2011 resulting in Lebanon having the highest refugee density per capita in any country worldwide (UNHCR, 2014). Until 2014, the national government adopted a *laissez-faire* approach with limited monitoring of how many refugees were entering and staying. Upon the formation of a new cabinet in 2014, it then shifted completely towards strict control imposing new residency policies, leading to an increase of refugees with illegal status and severe difficulties monitoring numbers and locations (Moawad & Andres, 2020, 2021). Informal settlements currently comprised of either marginalized camps predominantly inhabited by Palestinian refugees or scattered ITSs inhabited by Syrian refugees (Moawad, 2022). Here, ITSs differ from camps. This is due to the government's 'No Camp Policy' after the massive influx of Palestinian refugees since 1948 who were never repatriated (Andersen, 2016). This induced a strong stigma where

camps became associated with the Lebanese civil war and are perceived as spaces of radical Islamism leading to internal conflicts within the Lebanese State (Rougier, 2004).

Another major contextual difference is that ITSs have spread in former agricultural lands adjacent to small rural towns through a direct agreement between refugees and landlords (UNHCR, 2019). ITSs are managed and supervised by the *Shaweesh(s)* (assigned settlement coordinators) who during the pre-crisis period were labourers employed by landlords to manage and supervise their agricultural land. Their role is atypical of informal settlements in urban contexts manifesting itself in pre-agricultural ITSs and rests upon reporting all internal ITSs' activities to landlords and governmental security agencies (Moawad, 2022). Those living in ITSs live in 'inadequate conditions' described as overcrowded, not safe and dire (Moawad, 2022). The unplanned and unmanaged nature of ITSs (see, Figure 1) means that there are no fences around them, nor checkpoints. Since 2019, to sustain the temporary nature of the settlements, any shelters not built with timber or plastic sheeting are deemed illegal and are at a risk of being demolished (IFRC, 2019). Permitted materials are only those that can be easily disassembled such as timber and tarps (Moawad, 2022). Concrete masonry systems and metal sheets are not allowed. Such constraints have increased the impact of ITSs on the surrounding environment and infrastructure even further as those easily-dismantled materials do not provide adequate hygiene, disease-free environments nor are winterized. ITSs are off-grid. The collection and treatment of waste and wastewater management do not meet hygiene and safety standards where shared pit latrines are exposed and grey-black water is not linked to existing infrastructures. Such shelter and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) conditions generate critical health consequences for refugees and host community members which have contributed to increasing tensions, stigmatization and further rejection (Thorleifsson, 2016).

Syrian refugees face heightened safety concerns with an augmented vulnerability and daily uncertainty of eviction and the possibility of being arrested for those with an illegal status. The illegal parameter has triggered other difficulties particularly when refugees need access to healthcare facilities developing an anticipatory fear and anxiety of being detained. All these factors constitute the path-dependent elements upon which abjection has been constructed and transformed, noting that the spread of ITSs increased the strain



Figure 1. A Syrian ITS and the surrounding host community (Moawad, 2020).

on local municipalities which were already vulnerable prior to the refugee crisis (Moawad and Andres, 2020a). As such, whereas at the start of the crisis, the relationship between the Lebanese community and the incoming Syrian refugees was characterized by swathes of hospitality (UNHCR, 2013), this changed over time. Humanitarian-community-led volunteering efforts developed a social fatigue with time, leaving refugees to rely on their own coping mechanisms. This also increased a dependency on aid from INGOs to access food, health care and supply along with the provision of materials for the construction of their shelters (Moawad, 2022).

Xenophobic government-sponsored discourses accelerated the social disintegration and is revealed as a tacit form of control and power over refugees (Moawad, 2022). This led to a 'societal fragmentation force' (Carpí, 2016, p. 7) fueling a series of discriminatory and derogatory attitudes. This social fragmentation emerged as a continuous reminder that social cohesion is not easily implemented and that socio-cultural separation between the two communities is deemed acceptable as a better alternative by both the host community and refugees (Moawad, 2022). Similar to the Palestinian populations, Syrian refugees started to be perceived as a 'security threat' further fragmenting the relationship with the host community (Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2020). The combination of such factors resulted in incapacitating and destabilizing the already feeble socio-economic and public resources which resulted in containment measures. In 2014, 45 municipalities had imposed curfews on Syrian refugees and were preventing free public mobility to all within the community (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In 2018, mass evictions were taking place nationwide in an 'environment of discrimination and harassment' (Human Rights Watch, 2018). From 2017, informal labour markets which refugees were relying on started to be regulated so as to lessen the competitiveness for Lebanese citizens in a context of rising unemployment. Part of this policy specified that registered Syrian refugees would only be allowed to work in three sectors: agriculture, construction and environmental support services such as cleaning or refuse sorting (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2017). These factors led to an increase in refugees as abject subjects, pre-2020.

It is in this context coupled with an already crippled economic, political and national health system that the pandemic occurred (Moawad & Andres, 2021). The overall COVID-19 response in Lebanon was similar in many ways to other countries with several periods of national, on and off lockdowns. That said, national lockdown was challenged in regard to its detrimental economic consequences despite fear of whether the national health system had the ability to cope. This led to additional localized and tailored preventive measures targeting specific cities and towns with a heightened concern directed towards refugees' ITS. The impossibility of implementing WHO global guidance (e.g. social distancing) meant that refugees in ITSs were perceived as high-risk transmitters of spreading COVID-19 to adjacent communities. The communicated socio-political fear was that a humanitarian crisis and a national health disaster could occur if the coronavirus spread inside these ITSs. While our study looked at the Beqaa region, such processes affected ITSs across the country, though more ITSs inhabited by Syrian refugees than other illegal settlements. The lack of infrastructure and facilities on site, the absence of adequate and healthy outdoor and indoor areas, the high number of households sharing one tent with no safe social distancing induced confusion and fear among governmental and multi-sectoral agencies. This reflected spatialities of abjection which we explore next.

Spatialities of abjection and the COVID-19 pandemic

The 'in' and the 'out': from marginal zones to controlled camps

The increase of encampment measures and restrictions of mobility among Syrian refugees were constructed upon a perception and narrative of ITSs being 'abject spaces' with a high risk of contamination. This perception was the trigger of further exclusion but also stigma which strengthened further the rejection and separation between host communities and protracted refugees. Control mechanisms exercised as a result transformed the semiotic boundaries between an inside and an outside. Such boundaries were porous and altered in time depending on how COVID-19 was progressing (or not).

ITSs as abject spaces were 'zones' (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) of threat and stigma. At the start of the first wave, an immediate encampment based on a 14 days' quarantine was set up coupled with deep disinfection of the ITSs, while the host communities were also on (national) lockdown. This was then complemented by ongoing and persistent long-term containment mechanisms leading to total or partial (via curfews) lockdowns of ITSs (Moawad & Andres, 2021). The fear of contamination was linked to the difficulty of monitoring refugees' mobilities. Their immobilization was established by the temporary development of supplemental spatial demarcations to differentiate refugees from host communities but also refugees from one ITS and those from another. The aim of setting up encampments was to:

keep all refugees inside the camp and stop them from going outside or moving between camps, so if, God forbid, any Covid-19 cases emerge in a camp the virus will not spread to others; no one goes in or out of the camps (local NGO representative, 04/09/2020).

The process of abjection is here spatialized in two ways between those close-by (within the 'in' including the ITS and host community) and those further away (the 'out', beyond the boundaries of the town). *'The approach [covered] the entire town entries and exits. There were many checkpoints to stop visitors coming from other towns for our sake and the sake of the camps'* (local community representative, 02/09/2020). Such control over refugees was exercised by mobilizing fear, along with physical measures, to establish very strict oversight of movements as denoted by the words used by our interviewees including 'checkpoints', 'controlled mobility', 'monitoring', 'patrolling' and 'night guard'. As noted by one national governmental representative: *'The armed security forces were called to ensure order, and to encourage camp discipline the food assistance and food carts/vouchers were increased as an incentive to stay put'* (25/09/2020). The use of incentives and reliance on international aid to increase control is here crucial to 'maintain' order (similar to the pre-COVID-19 context). This reinforces the nature of ITSs as marginal zones where abject subjects live under suspended rules of freedom. As inexistent subjects they are in a state of transient permanence inherent to their enforced condition of passive 'waiting'.

Pandemic-specific spatialities of abjection denote a shift of the abject space being a marginal 'zone' to being a gated 'camp'. Going back to Isin and Rygiel's (2007) work, they argue that camps are considered as 'states of inexistence that function as reserves in which subjects and their rights are suspected temporalities, in transition from one subjecthood to another' (p. 196). Non-fenced ITSs turned into gated and controlled camps similar to the Palestinian camps. Pandemic-related enforcements made refugees immobile and paralyzed, rendering them into a situation of full passive 'waiting'. This shift

occurred without the physical transformation of the ITS but through a much tighter multi-level distribution of power in, out and across the settlement to enforce immobility and a hegemonic control of ITSs' entrances and exits. Here, the passive 'waiting' is triggered by the loss of accessibility to reach work and forces refugees to entirely rely on international aid. Refugees' rights to support their family were taken away: *'They have families and needed to work for long hours to provide for them. They used to work like 10 hours a day, now they have to abide by the times set by the municipality'* (local NGO representative, 08/10/2020).

Such pandemic coordination was constructed upon a clear distribution of roles, and power-sharing between governmental entities, municipalities, NGOs, police and military forces, with the *Shaweesh* being the sole refugee with mobility privileges and the responsibility to communicate relevant COVID-19 measures. Awareness stemmed from various processes of enforcement of rules and the coordination of the provision of daily support by humanitarian organizations (for food as well as cleaning and sanitizing products). This was stressed by several interviewees including a representative from the host community:

The governmental entities made the municipalities ensure that the camps are in full lock-down. The Minister of Internal Affairs would issue a statement that people cannot go in or out of camps. NGOs would tell their volunteers or students that they cannot enter the camps. The governmental entities in turn informed the *Shaweesh* of such regulations. And he would tell the refugees about this because he was held responsible (host community representative, 02/09/2020).

Any derogations were very closely regulated and monitored. Breaches were met with hefty fines and refugees could be arrested and detained:

To exit the camp a formal approval from the municipality is needed. Gatherings outside/inside the camp were forbidden and police patrols using mounted speakers notifying refugees to stay in their tents were adopted. Checkpoints were constructed at the entrances of the ITSs. A fine was imposed if a refugee was seen strolling outside of 50000LL and an enforced 14-day quarantine. Syrian refugees assisted the municipality in controlling the situation following up on instructed measures and quarantine mechanisms (local government representative, 09/09/2020).

In this situation of loss of mobility and humanitarian rights, refugees became further subordinated as the *Shaweesh's* internal surveillance became more hegemonic during the pandemic coupled with the increased assistance role of humanitarian organizations. This is unique to the context of Syrian refugees' ITSs. The *Shaweeshs* were the only ones allowed to leave the ITSs to buy food or assist refugees to access medical services. As explained by one *Shaweesh* *'In lockdown, in case anyone needed access to healthcare facilities I would take him in my car and bring him back'* (15/09/2020). Whilst pre-COVID-19, they controlled several aspects of refugees' everyday life, during COVID-19, their control went beyond; they auto-regulated abjection used as a form of immobilization. Those self-isolation protocols were constructed upon fear. This resonates with Sharkey and Shields (2008) argument about the spatial temporal conditions of ITSs as being out of place as a result of abjection, with refugees being further encamped within their dire environment, too scared (and controlled) to leave their authorized living boundaries. We explore this argument next.

Fear, the other and the ITSs as 'refuge'

Encampment and preventive measures dispersed fear, with the abject space being a space of contamination, hazard and uncertainty. Control mechanisms and COVID-19 communication channels that took place around ITSs directly used fear measures (fear about the unknown disease and fear about falling ill and dying) to restrict refugees' movements and increase their anxiety level. The use and profusion of fear resonate with similar emotional shifts observed across the globe and particularly the relationship to death. 'For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed this sense of distance from death' (Ho & Maddrell, 2021, p. 3). An interviewed *Shaweesh* highlighted that refugees '*saw on TV about the pandemic and how it moved from China to Beirut and were scared*' (23/09/2020). The uncertainty inherent to an unprecedented situation, along with the unpredictability of the virus, produced fear-led preventive measures as described by one of the host community representatives:

We explained to the refugees that you couldn't go out because if one of you catches this virus he or she will transmit it to the entire camp, that it is a very dangerous virus with serious symptoms. We explained to them that if we allow them to go out of the camp, we could not be sure that all necessary precautions were being practised to stop the spread of the virus. We are all living in close proximity to each other (02/09/2020).

The fear was also constructed upon the inability of the exterior environment to be able to respond and cope if the virus started to spread.

We even explained the drastic situation that would arise in the town if they did not stay in quarantine and were exposed to the local community because the municipality and NGOs did not have great means. There was a high risk if they left the camps. We explained to them that these implementations are to protect the camp and the local community, so no one outside the camp can spread the virus into the camp and the other way around (local NGO representative, 04/09/2020).

This again is about invisible boundaries being made visible, mentally, but also a transformation of the spatialities of abjection: the abject space emerged as a space of immediate refuge (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) despite its dire condition and the non-abject space became stigma. This informs the understanding of how ITSs work 'in all of its material, experiential, and diverse forms' (Isin & Rygiel, p. 184). Spatialities of abjection are transformed here through a changed relationship with the 'other'. The other is here an unknown body who possibly can carry the virus and an unknown body towards whom stigma occurs. The 'other' here is situated on both sides of the invisible boundary. The host community was 'very scared' of having refugees and ITSs close to them while the refugees were also scared of the local community. This was stressed as follows:

When we would hear of cases in camps, the town was scared because town people might have encountered anyone from the camp and transmit the virus. Here the local community looked at the camp in a different way. Not because they are Syrians but because of the coronavirus, because of how cramped up the camps were. If we would hear of a case in a certain street of the town we would stay away from it: same thing with the camps (local community representative 02/09/2020).

Refugees in the camps were also scared of the local community, so they also respected the quarantine rules (local NGO representative 04/09/2020).

For protracted refugees, their tents and the ITS became 'safe places' triggering a transformation of spatialities of abjection – here reversed. Such fear and abjection of the 'other', of those not encamped, spread further once cases developed in the host community and not in the ITS. In this reverse-fear situation, Syrian refugees found refuge within their ITSs when the reported number of COVID-19 cases were deemed higher within host community members. The abject space became a temporary refuge space.

Fundamentally though, as limited cases were observed in ITSs, abjection did not expand further because of the coronavirus but because of tensions that arose in line with socio-economic burdens that accelerated during the pandemic. Stigma founded upon fear of contamination increased the pre-COVID-19 socio-economic stigma, the dislike of the 'other', based on exacerbated, derogatory political speeches from politicians and a perceived uneven distribution of international aid (and who had the right to claim it). This compounded the pressure further on humanitarian agencies to revise and rapidly rebalance what was considered unequal support, primarily targeting stateless refugees in typically underfunded local municipalities. As noted by several representatives from host municipalities:

The NGOs were more active towards the Syrian refugees and not paying equal attention to the host community (local government representative, 12/08/2020).

We are suffering greatly, no aid and help is getting to the municipality from the government to distribute to the camps and vulnerable families of El Marj. We are trying our best but would have hoped for help from the government. Refugees in camps get help from NGOs or INGOs (local government representative, 06/10/2020).

Simultaneously though, the pandemic coupled with the political and economic crisis in Lebanon led to an increase in refugees' living costs, with daily products and essential commodities becoming more expensive to purchase (Moawad & Andres, 2021). In a context where labour opportunities became scarce and refugees only relied on savings and on dwindling NGOs' cash assistance, refugee-dependency on international aid increased. Two-thirds of the NGOs and refugee representatives/suppliers interviewed highlighted this critical concern:

Before the UN would provide aid around 700,000 LBP to each family. What does it do now? Barely provide bread for the family. It is not enough. People are living in very bad conditions now. [...] Today we buy the masks and gloves at our own cost: 7000 LBP for gloves, which is what they make in one day. Chicken is 11,000 LBP; our families need to eat, some families haven't eaten other than bread for two months (Shaweesh, 15/09/2020).

For both parties, increased vulnerabilities and struggles to meet basic everyday needs mean that there is an overall loss of hope and that abjection, fear and stigma may be reinforced further in the future in a context of ongoing and deepening political crisis. We return now to a discussion on the significance of this research in terms of unwrapping the relational complexity of spatialities of abjection in contexts where 'political waiting' is enforced.

Discussion

What occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented. What clearly emerged out of this research is a transformed relational complexity of spatialities of abjection in

a marginalized context with an enforced 'political waiting' transforming active 'waiting' to passive 'waiting'. This resulted in immobilizing Syrian refugees and shrinking their productivity. While ITSs as abject spaces were already considered as such prior to 2020, the pandemic led to a diversification of the spatialities of abjection due to a plethora of contradictory dynamics affecting the perception of refugees as abject subjects but also the characteristics of abject spaces, *per se*.

The temporal reading particularly the nature of 'waiting' of this relational complexity is critical here. Pre-pandemic, refugees experienced active 'waiting' in a context of non-permanence and the impossibility of having a 'normal' life; their socio-economic conditions meant that they had a dire life already and little prospect of a better future due to limited work opportunities and the reliance on international aid to meet basic needs. Active waiting became suppressed by a heightened 'political waiting' transforming active 'waiting' into passive 'waiting'. Refugees here lost the remaining rights they had kept to date (i.e. ability to move around) and coping mechanisms were inhibited. Robinson (2000, p. 296) argues that 'The spatiality of abjection and of the semiotic, then, is precisely about the persistent failure of borders, distinctions and separations'. In the investigated ITSs, due to a reversed fear (refugees being scared of the host community), boundaries and demarcation with the others became, on one hand, highly blurred (depending on which spaces and individuals were either dangerous or safe) but also even more rigid, founded on fear of the 'other'. Those boundaries appeared as a fragmented cordon sanitaire, invisible though very clearly drawn in individual perceptions.

The transformation of the spatialities of abjection during the pandemic reinforced how refugees enduring a 'political waiting' are made inaudible and invisible subjects, who submit to the control of external powers monitoring their mobilities and everyday needs. The sedentary nature of their protracted situation led to the temporary living unit (the temporary home replacing the original abandoned one (Moawad, 2022) becoming a 'safe' refuge despite its non-permanent character. While during our research no covid cases were reported in ITSs, the tent as refuge in a context of abjection and stigma reveals all the relational complexity of the refugees' 'political waiting' and the sense of limbo it generates. The refuge is made of one to two rooms and typically hosts more than one family with an observed number of 6 to 10 or more refugees in an environment with no air ventilation and natural light, making it unhealthy when all households convene around the '*Soubia*' (traditional stove; Moawad, 2022). While being a refuge, the shelter would also be the place for self-quarantine (noting that most quarantine units were either delayed, not delivered in all ITSs or not sufficient in an outbreak situation); as such, the refuge becomes a very high-risk living environment for disease contamination reinforcing even further refugees' 'stuckedness' in a confined space and a suspended time.

The transition of ITSs from marginal zones to controlled camps during the pandemic (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) but still within a situation of international aid support (though shrinking) revealed their highly unstable and porous nature and particularly how the 'rights of the rightless' are to be interpreted other than as 'human rights' (p. 198). There is a constant and permanent duality here, which also makes protracted Syrian ITSs unique: while being an abject space, ITSs are also a space where biotic diversity is accounted for. Refugees' lives are worth caring for through the distribution of international aid including not only food but also sanitation products (in the pandemic context). This contrasts with the surrounding host communities which, while having less restrictions on their mobilities

and rights to work, do not see their biological needs met and taken care of as much in times of political and socio-economic crisis. This denotes again the specific status of ITSs as abject spaces and to a stateliness character of protracted refugees. Their situation of 'political waiting' gave them a sustained right of accessing support from NGOs and INGOs which contrasted with Lebanese citizens for whom the State mainly failed to provide adequate support. There is a wider research agenda here to explore in the future.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to understand the spatialities of abjection affecting Syrian refugees living in ITSs and in a protracted situation of 'political waiting'. While abjection, stigma and xenophobia were already occurring prior to the pandemic, ITSs as abject spaces and refugees as abject subjects were targeted by supplemented rules and control. Those led to more controlled encampments and immobilization, increasing their dependency and reliance on international aid. Subordination was enforced by strict control, and measures driven upon fear and diverse spatialities of abjection that transformed the relationship towards invisible borders and between 'in', 'out' and towards the 'other'. While it could be argued that quantitatively the establishment of control and subordination of refugees has been a relative success as very limited cases have emerged inside ITSs to date, the wider humanitarian consequences are, as yet, difficult to access and more research will be needed. Having said that, even though no covid outbreaks were reported, the validity of data could be challenged as no regular check-ups and monitoring were conducted in ITSs to identify asymptomatic cases. In many ways, the situation in Lebanon has been unique; while in other informal settings, riots and protests have occurred as violent forms of resistance towards encampments and the difficulty of survival (for example, in Nigeria, refer to Anazonwu et al., 2021), no reported protests occurred in ITSs. On the contrary, riots spread in several Lebanese cities to denounce the crippled economic situation and the corrupted political system. Here, the reliance on the international aid regime has been a main contributing factor in maintaining order that re-transform active 'waiting' into passive 'waiting' generating a statelessness stasis and an in-limbo condition.

Conceptually and theoretically, the paper has engaged with a reinterpretation of the concept of abject space (Isin & Rygiel, 2007) situating it within abjection theory and through a renewed understanding of 'waiting', particularly the emergence of 'political waiting' in the field of cultural and social geography. Stuckedness in 'waiting' is the result of abjection mechanisms where the subject 'suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation' (Hage, 2009, p. 99). The paper has also developed further the notion of 'spatialities of abjection' (Robinson, 2000) and discussed how the complex relationality occurring in abjection manifests in various spaces, through porous, changing, invisible boundaries but also specific, temporal conditions; doing so allowed us to unpack the transformations of the abject space as alternatively and simultaneously considered as safe and a refuge or dangerous due to the risk of contamination. More importantly, it situated the reading of spatial abjection through a temporal lens, denoting how abject subjects are spatialized in a context of 'political waiting' but more importantly in a situation where active 'waiting' re-shifted to a passive 'waiting' because of the pandemic situation. This has revealed the perverse and long-term, detrimental effect of multi-level forms of control and subordination constructed upon uncertainty, restriction of mobility,

emergency and protection. Further research studies in cultural and social geography unwrapping spatialities of abjection are encouraged, in other marginal settings, to engage with the temporary and permanent dynamics affecting abject spaces and abject subjects, particularly those where forms of resistance and protest occur and where spaces of inclusion and social justice are contentious.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval was granted by University College London (reference 18,607.001). Participation was entirely voluntary and no incentives were used to facilitate the discussion. A participant information sheet along with a consent form was provided and obtained from each participant. Interviewees' names have been fully anonymized.

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