

Refugees in the Making

Durable Marks of the Nansen Passport in Contemporary Humanitarian Governance



Hanna Berg

–We had agreed to leave together.

–To Belarus?

–Yes, to Belarus, but the problem is that I should have left a long time ago. But do you know what stopped me from leaving?

–Your dossier?

–Our dossier. I thought that I could wait since I would travel with my family to America. But it doesn't seem like that will happen . . .

—Conversation with Said in Amman, October 2021¹

During the autumn of 2021, Belarus, in response to European Union (EU) sanctions, started issuing tourist visas to migrants, encouraging illegal border crossing into Europe (Adams 2021; Walsh 2021). In Jordan, thousands of Syrian asylum seekers, having waited for several years for third-country resettlement, seized the opportunity, which pushed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Jordan into proclamation. Except for strongly advising ‘against travelling through irregular and informal routes such as those to Europe through Belarus’ on its official Facebook page on 4 October 2021, on 17 November that year the UNHCR also published a 25-minute video information session on irregular

mobility (*l-tanaqqul gheyr l-muntazim*). Alongside stressing the dangers of such mobility, the UN agency explained that, in contrast to third-country resettlement – organized and coordinated in collaboration between states and the UNHCR, thus ensuring refugee protection – irregular mobility was ‘a personal choice to leave through illegal paths and expose oneself to problems and risks.’² Further, the UNHCR repeatedly stressed that leaving Jordan for, for example, Belarus meant losing the internationally recognized refugee status,³ and the protection and assistance that this secured – including third-country resettlement (UNHCR Jordan 2021).

Conducting ethnographic research in Jordan that autumn, studying how humanitarian bureaucratic artefacts mediate both spatial and temporal (im) mobility for Syrian asylum seekers, I witnessed how the topic of Belarus intensified among my interlocutors, on social media and in news media. Everyone knew someone who had travelled – and many wanted to leave themselves, but not everyone did. The friends Said and Ashraf had long considered leaving Jordan together, although, in the end, only Ashraf did so. I met them for the first time in 2016, when my research project was yet to take form. At the time, I was working as an interpreter at a rehabilitation centre in Amman for Syrians who had been injured as a consequence of the brutal violence that followed the Syrian revolution 2011. They were also working there, informally (Lenner and Turner 2019), helping out with various administrative tasks and daily business such as buying food, cleaning and helping those who resided there. Said and Ashraf were, like most Syrians in Jordan, registered at the UNHCR. Since the Jordanian government is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, they were not recognized as refugees, but as asylum seekers (*tālibin lujū*) – despite the absence of any tangible asylum law in the country (Stevens 2013). In Jordan, Syrians and other refugees cannot enter any process of asylum, which immobilizes their lives in various ways both spatially and temporally. In my larger research, I examine the role of bureaucracy in (re)producing and maintaining aftermaths of humanitarian emergencies.⁴ Approaching bureaucratic procedures not only as cogs in the humanitarian machinery (Dunn 2012; Gatter 2023; Nakueira 2019) but also as a condition through which certain ways of ‘knowing and doing’ are produced, my interest lies in how epistemologies of humanitarian governance are (re)produced both in navigations of everyday bureaucratic ‘street-level’ practices (Andreetta 2019; Cabot 2012, 2013; Gatter 2023; Heyman 1995; Tuckett 2018) and in institutional trajectories through which they become conditioned (Riles, 2006). How Syrians’ everyday documentary practices affect and (re)shape their own spatiotemporal (im)mobility is one object of observation in this regard.

Locating ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ ‘at opposite ends of the political spectrum’ (Crawley and Skleparis 2018: 49) generates an imaginary distinction

between vulnerable and non-vulnerable humans, one that justifies the differentiation of not only legitimacy for the international protection of people in displacement but also mobility. Considered the only legitimate 'humanitarian corridor' for refugees, third-country resettlement is a bureaucratic power technique within a larger, global system through which resettlement states attempt to regulate who gets to enter their national territories – what David FitzGerald (2019) conceptualizes as 'remote control'. In the humanitarian neoliberal diagnostic through which it has become morally acceptable to classify only *some* refugees as deserving of third-country resettlement (Sözer 2020), the bureaucratic procedures through which such remote control is exercised are organized around the notion of vulnerability. That it is only those categorized as the 'most vulnerable' who are granted such humanitarian corridor is a common sense central to contemporary humanitarian governance (Fassin 2007; Sözer 2020; Ticktin 2014).

Accordingly, during my time in Jordan, I observed how, in contrast to what the UNHCR insisted on in its information video, refugees' asylum-seeker certificate was a document distinguishing not only people of concern for the UNHCR from those who were not. Rather, it was also involved in several bureaucratic processes distinguishing, along humanitarian framings of vulnerability, different categorical memberships *within* the 'asylum seeker' label itself (Cabot 2013; Sözer 2020; Zetter 2007). Engaging with Syrian asylum seekers whose (non-)vulnerability had determined their (in)eligibility for resettlement, I witnessed how people deemed ineligible sought other alternatives for leaving Jordan. Belarus was one such alternative. By offering migrants, as described in news media (Adams 2021; Walsh 2021), tourist visas, anyone in Jordan (as well as elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond) with a valid passport and sufficient economic means could go to a tourist office and apply for a visa. Once the visa was issued, they flew as tourists to Minsk, from where they began their 'irregular' journey through the Belarusian–Polish forests to reach their destination in Europe. In this chapter, Said and Ashraf serve as an example of how classifications of vulnerability among asylum seekers differentiate their paper realities, which, in turn, affect their alleged 'personal choices' to leave or to stay in displacement. In early 2016, the UNHCR had contacted Said and his family, informing them that their dossier had been identified as a resettlement case, and hence they entered a long, slow process of resettlement – a process that was still ongoing when I arrived in Jordan in 2021. The UNHCR had never called Ashraf. Since it is the UNHCR that assesses and identifies resettlement cases, he could not contact the agency himself, and trying to do so was in vain since 'they never answer the phone' as Ashraf, and many with him, had repeatedly explained to me. For Ashraf, then, an asylum seeker not vulnerable enough for resettlement in a state where there are virtually

no processes of asylum (Stevens 2013) – leaving had to be through a channel other than the UNHCR. Travelling from Jordan to Belarus, crossing the borders into Europe in October 2021, he left behind not only his friend Said but also his legal status. Although it was Ashraf's alleged invulnerability according to humanitarian common sense that pushed him into what the UNHCR called 'a personal choice' of irregular mobility, such a choice made him categorically even less vulnerable – becoming 'a migrant'. Ashraf's choice to leave Jordan, as well as Said's choice to stay, begs the question of how categorical distinctions between 'refugees' and 'migrants' have become understood as *representing* human realities while they – as I argue in this chapter – rather *produce* them. It also begs the question of how notions of vulnerability have become an essential measurement in the process of making such distinctions.

Alongside recent ethnographic scholarship on the interconnections between 'categorical fetishism' (Apostolova 2015; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Peteet 2007), documents (Andreetta 2019; Cabot 2012; Horton and Heyman 2020; Nakueira 2019; Thomson 2012; Tuckett 2018) and mobility (Achilli 2016; FitzGerald 2019; Khosravi 2010; Monsutti 2008, 2018) in humanitarian and migratory contexts, this chapter seeks to unsettle the misleading stability of these categories. Through a combination of archival data concerning the first legal refugee identity document in 1922 and ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Jordan 2021–22, it explores historical conditions that have made possible the formation of present categorical distinctions between (vulnerable) refugees and (non-vulnerable) migrants, and of regular and irregular mobility along such distinctions.

Methods and Material: Refugees in the 1920s and the 2020s

Engaging with the archive, the empirical focus of this chapter is the fond 'Refugees Mixed Archival Group', also called the Nansen Fonds, which is one of eight fonds located in the United Nations Archive in Geneva and which contains 615 boxes (United Nations Geneva 2021). Created in 1947, the Nansen Fonds is a mixture of correspondence; administrative, financial and other written records; and brochures, newspaper clippings and some photographs – all of which address the emerging 'problem' of refugees in one way or another. Archives, Ann Laura Stoler (2016: 5) suggests, have a way of drawing scholars' attention 'to their own scripted temporal and spatial designations', generating an understanding of historical events and makings as distant pasts: things that are no longer, things that are separated from contemporary life. As a result, historical continuities in the present can easily be left unnoticed. In this sense, as institutions 'founded on a claim to be a neutral body of preservation' (Azoulay 2019), archives set the condi-

tions for what we are able to see in and through them (Azoulay 2013). One such condition is ‘the omnipresence of categories shaped by the political regime’ (Ibid.: 549), serving as a prism through which we as scholars tend to study the past as distinct from the present. It is through such conditions that categorical distinctions between refugees and migrants have become conceptual conventions on which we as scholars rely when we look for them in archives, and elsewhere. Looking beyond such ‘conditioned sight’ demands attention to the archive itself, not only the artefacts it preserves. Accordingly, alongside the notion of ‘archiving-as-process rather than archives-as-things’ (Stoler 2010: 20), I attend simultaneously to the written lines in archival documents, the processes through which they have come to exist in archives and how such processes condition what we as scholars look for when we approach them. Doing so allows for approaching these archival documents as sites of situated knowledge production rather than as sources of ready-made knowledge.

Further, it is crucial in looking beyond such conditioned sight to pay close attention to the connectivities between past and present makings, an exercise for which ethnography serves us well – allowing us to disrupt the often hard surface of bureaucratic officialdom (Heyman 1995: 264–65) visible not only in records of policy and law but also in archival records. During my research in Jordan between 2021 and 2022, I engaged daily in different bureaucratic processes that allowed me to follow the various procedures of eligibility assessments of humanitarian services, and how refugees and humanitarians alike navigated them. In this chapter, I situate some of these engagements with an ethnographic reading of the archive. Addressing, in tandem, the archive and the everyday documentary strategies of asylum seekers in the present day constitutes an attempt to explore how processes of categorical makings from about 100 years ago bear on categorical distinctions today. When conceptualizing bureaucratic ‘thought-work’, anthropologist Josiah Heyman (1995) talks about worldviews as the general guidelines on which bureaucrats rely in their everyday thinking and decision-making. He suggests that, while expert knowledge suffices for routine tasks, it is the worldview of the workers that influences their actions and informs their common sense. Addressing contemporary categorical distinctions between refugees and migrants as conceptual conventions, I think along Heyman’s conceptualizations. How did the worldviews of the deputies and delegates of the League of Nations in the 1920s guide their ways of knowing – that is, their ‘thought-work’? What bearings do such worldviews have on humanitarian governance in the present? Attending both to the archive and the contemporary documentary strategies of Ashraf and Said is an ethnographic endeavour to examine the worldviews of the deputies and delegates’ ‘thought-work’ as both a condition through which

certain bureaucratic categories came into being *and* a condition through which humanitarian workers and bureaucrats, but also we as scholars, have come approach them today. As such, this chapter is also a methodological endeavour to disrupt our own ‘thought-work’, which conditions our outlook as anthropologists of migration and humanitarianism. Accordingly, conducting ethnographic research in Jordan, I followed the everyday bureaucratic work of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in urban spaces, irregular tented settlements throughout Jordan and in Azraq refugee camp.⁵ I participated in both ‘street-level’ documentary practices (Andretta 2019; Cabot 2012, 2013; Gatter 2023; Heyman 1995; Tuckett 2018), such as processes of eligibility assessments of various humanitarian services, and in more institutionalized processes such as staff meetings and community-representative meetings. These engagements allowed me to trace procedures of data registration and the production of reports, proposals, minute sheets and project evaluations – as well as refugees’ and humanitarians’ navigations in and with them. In this chapter, I engage in particular with the story of Ashraf and Said and their own bureaucratic navigations alongside categorizations of refugees’ (non-)vulnerability. Central to contemporary humanitarianism (Fassin 2007; Sözer 2020; Ticktin 2014), vulnerability assessments have become key when differentiating between refugees – people in ‘real’ need of protection – and migrants, as described in the UNHCR information video on irregular mobility – people who, rather than being exposed, expose themselves to danger. Yet, vulnerability has also become a means to differentiate *among* refugees, separating the ‘really vulnerable’ refugees from those ‘not-so-vulnerable’ (Sözer 2020). It is along such lines that Ashraf and Said’s experiences have become divided. In this respect, after years of living in Jordan under the precarious legal status of ‘asylum seeker’, Ashraf’s search for a solution beyond third-country resettlement and Said’s wait for the same serve here as an incitement to examine, in their lives, the durabilities of the historical conditions shaping the first legal refugee identity document. That is, to explore how and to what extent categorical makings in the past have become categorical conventions in the present (Stoler 2016).

The Nansen Passport

Created in 1922, the first legal identity document for refugees, known as the Nansen Passport, emerged in a political context in which the world transformed from empires and colonial mandates into nation-states, producing “‘extra’ populations’ that exceeded the people of the emerging nations (Azoulay 2019; Soguk 1999; Watenpaugh 2015, Rodogno 2021) – a transformation that Dawn Chatty (2013: 38) has called ‘the “unmixing” of

peoples'. The question of what to do with emerging denationalized subjects laid the ground for the Nansen Passport, following the legal refugee status, and for what has come to lie at the heart of modern humanitarianism (Fassin 2007, 2012; Malkki 1995; Ticktin 2014; Watenpaugh 2015). Devised by the Norwegian explorer and politician Fridtjof Nansen, the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees at the League of Nations, the Nansen Passport was first envisioned for displaced and dispossessed Russian refugees in the early twentieth century (Robson 2017; Soguk 1999: 129). As the refugee problem 'grew', the word 'Russian' would disappear from the title a few years later. Nansen served as High Commissioner for Refugees between 1921 and 1930, which is a time period of concern for this chapter. In particular, I engage with (1) the correspondence and reports concerning the proposal and implementation of the Nansen Passport for Russian refugees in 1922, (2) the labour exchanges of refugees along the same process, (3) the attempts to extend the Passport's provisions to Armenian refugees in the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon between 1924 and 1929. Exploring how deputies and delegates of the League of Nations dealt with questions of responsibility towards refugees, alongside imperial projects of population exchange and refugee labour highlight ambiguities around how refugees were to be categorized and governed. The attempts a few years later to extend the Nansen Passport to contexts beyond Europe further raised questions about *what* a refugee was and how to define and distinguish refugees from non-refugees.

Keith Watenpaugh (2015) suggests that while there are distinctions between the structure and scope of humanitarian responsibility for refugees in the post-Ottoman Middle East in the early twentieth century and the postwar Europe following 1951, the Nansen Passport played an important role as a 'humanitarian-bureaucratic tool' (Ibid.: 174) in what constituted 'an early example of what today's relief or development workers would call the substitution of humanitarianism for politics' (Ibid.: 161). Vulnerability, although more closely linked to national citizenship than a measurement of deservingness for humanitarian assistance, was nevertheless central to the idea that there was an international obligation to "do something" about refugees' (Ibid.: 169). While the creation of the Nansen Passport has been afforded some attention by historians (Housden 2010; Long 2011, 2013), archival materials are commonly treated as 'items of a complete past rather than an active element of a present' (Azoulay 2012: 4), which situates the Nansen Passport as a historical trace rather than a durable mark (Stoler 2016: 6) in the paper-realities that refugees and migrants experience today. Consequently, the distinction between 'refugees' and 'migrants' has become a conceptual convention (Ibid.: 8), hampering our capability to 'look beyond the use (and abuse) of categories' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018: 61) and the

features that distinguish the individuals assigned to them (Stoler 2016: 17). Hence, while Watenpaugh cautions against conflating the limited nature of governing and the defining of refugees in the 1920s with refugee policies that took shape after the 1951 Refugee Convention, I believe that there is potentiality in examining early examples alongside contemporary ones. For, as Stoler (2016) convincingly argues, in imperial histories of the present categories do not abruptly disappear while others accidentally emerge. Rather, categories are constantly reanimated, remodelled, sequential and consequential of each other. Intertwining everyday conditions generated by the contemporary legal asylum-seeker category in Jordan with bureaucratic negotiations at a moment in history when such categories were still in the making, I look for historical continuances rather than ruptures. In what follows I begin by examining the official report of the first conference regarding the Nansen Passport held in 1922. Attending to the thought-work of government representatives in this conference concerning refugees' right to mobility and legal status allows for exploring such historical continuances in today's humanitarian governance.

Proposing an Identity Certificate: Mobility as a Refugee Right?

Created 'through the unfolding of one conference from the materials produced at another', reports are part of an institutional trajectory (Riles 2006: 83). A 'document's career' (Ibid.) – the procedure through which it becomes a concrete printed object – is thus at once sequential and consequential. That is, while the procedure of well-defined steps through which a finished report comes into being is part of the document, it is also the context of its making (Ibid.: 85). Once a successful printed product, the report itself becomes part of the wider trajectory, shaping the context of the chain. Accordingly, the first conference 'On Passports for Russian Refugees', held in 1922, was an early step in a long chain of conferences, documents and reports that 'both conceptually and organizationally' (Soguk 1999: 120) would come to mediate refugees' right to mobility as well as governments' rights to control it (FitzGerald 2019). Organized to deal with the creation of a distinct legal identity document for Russian refugees, this conference was part of a larger and longer resettlement plan, which, as historian Davide Rodogno (2021) shows, largely failed in the end, as most refugees were never resettled. Here, I pay close ethnographic attention to the questions that emerged among the government representatives during this conference. Despite the ultimate failure of the ambitions of the larger plan, exploring how mobility regulations took shape alongside negotiations and (dis)agreements on governments' rights and responsibilities towards

refugees, this conference highlights a moment in history when irregular and regular mobility was yet to be distinguished along defined categories.

On 8 June 1922, a letter was sent from the Assistant High Commissioner for Russian Refugees to the Secretary General of the League of Nations ‘concerning the activities of the High Commissariat, especially in regard of the question of legal status, papers of identity and visas for Russian refugees’. Claiming that previous meetings with different states had shown the difficulty of coming to ‘any definite result in these questions on an international basis’, the Assistant High Commissioner requested the summoning of a conference ‘intended to find the quickest means of making practical progress in the question of identity papers and visas’ (Nansen Geneva Office 1922).

Not only will the discussions deal entirely with questions of a technical legal nature, with which the members of the High Commissariat are not conversant, but it seems also essential, in order to come to some practical conclusion, that a definite scheme be worked out which will take into consideration the criticisms and objections made hitherto by the various governments and that this scheme be circulated among the members of the two conferences before they meet . . . The question is, it must be admitted, of a highly complex nature. It may appear necessary to enter into special negotiations with the various governments and ascertain the general attitude of the legal advisers of these governments on the question of the refugees and the policy they are pursuing at present or intend to adopt in the near future. (Ibid.)

Said and done. Between 3 and 5 July 1922, the conference was held in Geneva, hosting representatives from sixteen nations, the International Labour Office (ILO) and the League of Nations. The negotiations at the conference unfolded around the idea of creating an identity certificate on which refugees could apply for visas, as Nansen had proposed in a report three months earlier.

The two principal questions before the conference were:

Would the Governments be ready to grant through their competent organisations such certificates of identity as were described in the Nansen report?

Would the Governments be prepared to grant visas to certifications of identity issued by other Governments, and on the same conditions as ordinary passports? (Governmental Conference 1923)

While some states already had their own bureaucratic systems in place with specific documents for noncitizens and did not see the point of

introducing the Nansen Passport, others had no objection. The French representative claimed that the French government

could not issue Russian refugees documents of identity which would allow them to move freely about Europe under conditions which would perhaps be better than those granted to nationals of neighbouring [*sic*] and friendly countries. (Ibid.)

The Hungarian representative, however, 'felt in a position to state that [his government] would make no objection to the certificate of identity or to the reduction of the expenses of transport and of visas', a view shared by the Serb-Croat-Slovene government as long as 'all the other states were in agreement'. Yet, the Swiss representative

feared that the certificate of identity which was asked for by Dr. Nansen required wither [*sic*] too much or too little. It was indeed difficult to regard such a document as a regular document granted by the states. If, on the other hand, it was granted subject to the laws and regulations in force for the admission and residence of foreigners, the state concerned would be taking away with one hand what it granted with the other. To arrive at a practical result it would be necessary to abolish all police provisions regarding foreigners. (Ibid.)

Governments' own attempts at similar solutions were conditioned by the geopolitical context of the time and informed the debate. For instance, bounded by the Peace Treaty of Riga, an arrangement that had ended the Polish–Soviet war of 1920 (Stanisławski 2022; Wandycz 1969), Poland noted that '[t]he legal situation of the Russian refugees in Poland differ[ed] essentially from their legal situation in the countries which [had] signed no Treaty with the Soviet Government'. The country stressed the fact that in recognizing the Moscow government, it had been compelled to 'take into consideration certain rules laid down by the Soviet Authorities'. Consequently, Poland could 'not agree to the delivery of certifications of identity on which it was specified that the bearer belonged to the Russian State'. For 'humanitarian reasons and in consideration of the precarious situation of the refugees', the Polish government had therefore, about a year earlier, issued 'a special passport' that enabled 'the bearer freely to cross the frontier of the republic'. Regrettably, the Polish delegate complained that almost all diplomatic or consular representatives in Warsaw had refused to issue visas based on such a passport (Governmental Conference 1923). Accordingly, stating that the proposed identity certificates for refugees 'would in no way encroach [upon] the rights of States with regard to their control of foreigners', the president of the conference gave room for further arguments to be raised regarding the transit visa. It would, he cautioned,

perhaps be difficult for a country to accept a refugee coming from another country if it were not certain that it could send him back to that country if necessary. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the governments to undertake an obligation to take back their Russian refugees. (Ibid.)

The suggested solutions to this ‘extremely delicate’ question involved the possibility of states demanding the return of refugees ‘to the State whence they had come’. Problems arose around whether states would accept the return of refugees who had left their territory. The French representative asked if it would not be preferable to make optional states’ ‘mentioning or not mentioning the permission to return’ – that is, having ‘full liberty to prevent the return if it did not put on the certificate “with authorization to return if necessary”’ (Ibid.). The negotiations back and forth regarding this suggestion did not reach a final solution during the conference as few representatives felt that they had the authority to take such decision without referring to their governments.

The ability to produce official documents and declarations of rights, Ariella Azoulay (2019) notes, ‘already marks the excess of particular rights’ held by those who do the granting. She suggests that to *unlearn* human rights, we need to differentiate between disabled, textual and imperial rights – that is, to study the connectivities between rights that have been ‘put out of action’ and replaced with rights inscribed in universal documents and declarations to maintain the unwritten rights of some people in exercising imperial power over others. Consequently, often studied in relation to the heavy, rights-based discourses that followed the 1951 Refugee Convention (Watenpaugh 2015), documents have become understood as ‘timeless and integral element[s]’ (Sharma 2020: 31) in all forms of migratory and humanitarian governance. Scholars have contributed to the unmaking of such understanding. Radhika Viyas Mongia (1999) cautions against assuming the emergence of the passport in regulating mobility between states to be an intrinsic part of state sovereignty; she sees it rather as a means of ensuring its very effectivity. Through her work on Canada’s emerging demand for Indian immigrants to hold passports in the early twentieth century, she shows how the pseudo-universality of the passport was enabled through the principle of pseudo-reciprocity between nation-states. Rather than simply reflecting a new world order, she notes, the emergence of the passport extended the rule of colonial difference. The creation of the passport on colonial and racial grounds – wrapped in the language of universality – is likewise observed by Nandita Sharma (2020), who links documentary controls and the ‘emergence of the figure of the (Im)migrant’ (Ibid.: 33) with the British slave trade in the early nineteenth century. She suggests that the implementation of immigration controls – governed

through papers – was part of an effort ‘to find new ways to discipline labor in the absence of slavery’ (Ibid.: 31). Accordingly, the 1922 invention of the first legal document for refugees was hardly a ‘mere historical coincidence’ (Soguk 1999: 133). In the new world, ‘everyone had to become a citizen of a state’ (Ho 2006: 306), and thus national passports became instrumental for “envisoning” the state and its counterparts, the citizen and the nation’ (Soguk 1999: 128). In this context, the creation of the Nansen Passport became part of the process of distinguishing non-nationals from nationals, constituting ‘an early international juridical notice of the permanence of the refugee’s exile’ (Watenpaugh 2015: 174).

Fieldnote, Amman, September 2021

‘How much sugar do you want?’ Ashraf asks me, standing in the tiny kitchen of the humble apartment that he shares with three other young men in Western Amman. They are all out working, and we had decided to have tea and shisha here after having dinner at a neighborhood restaurant close by. ‘Like you’ I answer, ‘a little’.

We sit down in one of the two sofas in the small living room. As he places the teacups on the little table and puts the coal on the shisha-head he says, ‘I’ll tell you all the details. I have already left my passport at an office to get the visa.’ Telling me about his doings these last few days in preparation for the travel to Belarus and the wait for the visa, he wants to hear what I think about it. He tells me that no one knows that he will travel, not his roommates, and not even Said.

Indeed, throughout my time in Jordan in 2021–22, the UNHCR asylum-seeker certificate seemed to generate permanent precarious conditions in displacement rather than securing the humanitarian promise of regular, secure mobility that the UNHCR continuously promoted. Ashraf was one of those who, with the passing of time, had realized that leaving Jordan would probably never happen for him through the UNHCR. Hence, Belarus became another way for him to exit his asylum-seeker status. Yet, beyond the asylum seekers themselves, third-country resettlement was also a central topic of conversation among humanitarian workers. In opposition to asylum seekers’ testimonies to the extended processes and the ambiguities and injustices in and around them, humanitarian workers often insisted that third-country resettlement is *one* solution proposed for refugees, not a right for them to claim (*tawṭin ḥall w mish ḥaqq*). During the 1922 conference, however, such rationale regarding refugees’ rights and states’ responsibilities in securing such rights was evidently yet to take shape. The draft report of the 1922 conference demonstrates a search for consensus between parties. Delegates were not only concerned about *whether* there should be an identity certificate specifically for refugees but also what form such certificate should take, and whether the accompanying rights and regulations

should resemble (or not) those of identity documents issued for citizens. Reading the discussions that unfolded during this conference as sites where ‘epistemological and political anxiety’ was mediated (Stoler 2010) thus helps to unsettle chronological understandings of *first* the emerging issue of already-defined refugees, leading, *then*, to a rational response in the form of a legal status representing them. Beyond indicating a legal document in the making, it also shows the creation of a parallel categorical membership – which process forms the central focus of the following sections. Through an ethnographic reading of correspondence sent between different delegates working for the League of Nations – mainly, the Assistant High Commissioner, Thomas Frank Johnson and the League’s representative in Beirut, Georges Burnier, who was also a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – I trace how questions around labour and legal status mediated understandings of refugees’ vulnerabilities, rights and responsibilities, and how these in turn informed refugees’ deservingness of humanitarian assistance.

Refugee Labour: The Movement of Humans and Archival Documents

While the documents examined in this chapter are today located at the Archives of the United Nations Office in Geneva, they have travelled between different organizations and offices before ending up there. A refugee section for arranging and archiving documents about the subject was first created at the League of Nations when Nansen became the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees. The files were then moved in 1925 as the High Commissioner’s Office was transferred to the ILO, which hosted the files for four years before they returned to the League again in the end of 1929. With the establishment of the autonomous Nansen Office for Refugees two years later, most of the files of the refugee section were moved there. At its closure in 1938, the files rejoined the Secretary of the League (United Nations Geneva 2021). The mobility of these archived documents tells a story not only about the administrative history of the organizations involved but also about the history and mobility of the refugee category and the features assigned to it.

In contemporary refugee policy, I suggest, the assessment of vulnerability has become a vital bureaucratic technique for exercising a form of ‘remote control’ (FitzGerald 2019). It is through such assessment processes that the understanding of third-country resettlement as an entitlement only for the deserving ones, rather than a political right for anyone displaced, becomes easily justifiable. The UNHCR webpage explains that it only seeks to assess highly vulnerable families against the resettlement criteria. That definitions

of ‘the most vulnerable’ differ between resettlement countries, however, makes it difficult for asylum seekers in Jordan to navigate which criteria that must be fulfilled to be considered eligible. Humanitarian workers have in many conversations likewise stressed the lack of authority of the UNHCR to make any final resettlement selections. In the introduction of the UNHCR resettlement handbook, it is explained that resettlement is

a process that enables refugees to relocate to another country with a legal status ensuring international protection and ultimately permanent residence. It is a unique opportunity, offering individuals and families a meaningful chance to rebuild their lives in an environment where their rights are protected from day one, and where access to naturalization and citizenship promise an end to years of displacement.

Depending on the operational context, resettlement may be primarily implemented as a response to individual protection needs, or as a mechanism to achieve broader strategic protection and durable solutions goals for particular groups or populations. As well as being a tool for protection and solutions, resettlement is also a practical way for countries to demonstrate solidarity with host communities who assume the greatest share of responsibility for protecting refugees. (UNHCR 2024)

What are the historical conditions through which third-country resettlement has come to be considered ‘a practical way to demonstrate solidarity’ with host communities, rather than governments’ political obligation towards those who have been forcedly displaced? In this section, I turn to correspondence concerning the coordination of the labour exchange of refugees in the early twentieth century. Attending to the terms and conditions that took shape at the intersection between questions of labour and refuge highlights a blurry boundary between governments and the League’s responsibility, accountability and, moral obligations towards the Russian refugees whose mobility they sought to govern. Following Ashraf’s story along such questions allows for addressing how today’s vulnerability criteria for third-country resettlement ultimately force people deemed ‘not-so-vulnerable’ to find ways to mobility beyond it.

In June 1922, a letter was sent to Nansen raising the problem that refugees being moved to Austria as agricultural labour had instead ‘began to look for work in other industries’. Stressing ‘the necessity of their keeping to agricultural work’, the letter suggested that Russian refugees should formally confirm their understanding that ‘they look for no other than agricultural work’ in Austria:

It would be very desirable if a written undertaking could be obtained from individual refugees in which they agree not to seek any other employment in Austria than that to which they are sent, on the understanding that the Austrian government would be at

liberty to expel them in the event of the undertaking being broken. (Nansen Geneva Office 1922)

The letter further stressed that a transfer of 200 agriculturalists from Egypt and Cyprus had been delayed as some Russian refugees had declined the relocation to Austria, pleading ‘that they were not strictly speaking agriculturalists, although they had registered as such’. Arguing that the work ‘by reason of [the refugees’] unwillingness to proceed’ would be ‘unsatisfactory and thus prejudice the reception of further Russian refugees by the Austrian Government’, it was suggested that a full transport of refugees from other sources, proceeding via Bulgaria, would be arranged instead. About a week beforehand, the Assistant High Commissioner for Russian Refugees had raised concerns about the refugees’ own negotiations regarding the labour exchanges. Writing to Burnier, he stated that

[w]ith reference to the difficulties which the refugees appear to raise in regard to their evacuation to other countries, I really think that you would be fully justified in pointing out that every possible precaution is taken by the High Commissariat to ensure that suitable employment conditions are offered to refugees in the countries to which they are evacuated and that *it is not reasonable for them*, in the circumstances, to ask for details as to wages, hours of labour and the exact localities in which they will be employed . . . *It does not appear to us that it is for the refugees to say* whether they will accept employment or not, but that they should be informed that suitable employment has been found for them and that, if they do not accept it, they must bear the consequences mentioned above. (Ibid.; emphasis added)

Following this, he provided Burnier with a number of arguments for why the refugees should have no say in arrangements that the League had undertaken for them, signaling a political reality that assumed some people to be fully entitled to decide over the lives of others. Indeed, in imposing evacuation through labour exchanges, the commissioners ‘acted as if they could exercise their right to decide who belongs where, why, and in which way, for the sake of whose good’ (Azoulay 2019: 479). While Azoulay’s critique is directed at forced displacement in the postwar period following the Second World War, this letter signals a similar political worldview among the bureaucrats.⁶ While this correspondence shows the League’s early attempts to govern refugees, the discussions also highlight how mobility regulations were (re)shaped and negotiated by refugees themselves – who did not easily submit to the proposals provided by the League and governments. By refusing work in different sectors and resettlement based on certain employments, or seeking employment in other sectors once resettled, the refugees’ activities brought about new questions for the delegates which

generated new conditions and bureaucratic procedures in the projects of the League.

Further, the political context of the early twentieth century raised the question not only of what to *do* with emerging denationalized subjects but also of whose responsibility they were. In the closing years of the Russian civil war and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, people from the Russian Empire who had directly or indirectly supported the anti-communist White Army led by Pyotr Wrangel were, in 1922, evacuated to Constantinople, the Ottoman capital, at the time occupied by the Allied powers. In June that year, a telegram was sent to the Secretary General of the League, questioning how it was that ‘governments who [were] in a position to support a military and political organization comprising several tens of thousands of refugees’ were not able to provide with practical help for the civilians affected by the military occupation in Constantinople. Appealing, on behalf of Dr Nansen, for more money to be ‘devoted entirely to [the] evacuation and employment’ of Russian refugees, the telegram stressed the moral obligations of the French government towards the refugees considering that they had recognized the ‘Wrangel Government and encouraged its venture’.

It must not be forgotten that the responsibility for the maintenance of 27,000 Russian refugees in Constantinople lies not with the League of Nations but with the Allied Powers who actually occupy the town. The Council has repeatedly announced that the League cannot assume any kind of responsibility for the material welfare of the refugees. (Nansen Geneva Office 1922)

At this time, various Russian unions were formed in Constantinople to make different claims on behalf of the refugees there. For instance, only about two weeks before the League’s appeal to governments to take responsibility for the suffering they had caused, a letter from ‘the Russian Committee of Constantinople’ had requested the League to ‘take steps for their protection’. The League refused such responsibility:

Dr. Nansen point out, however, that in appointing him High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, the League, contrary to the suggestion of your Committee, assumed no responsibility towards the refugees and expressly confined his task to an endeavour [*sic*] to find the refugees productive employment where possible. (Ibid.)

The questions of *whose* responsibility refugees were, and *what* such responsibility should imply suggest an imperial context wherein some people were entitled to formulate rights and restrictions for others. Yet perhaps even more importantly, such questions testify to a moment in time when refugees were yet to be stripped of their personhood, histo-

ries and politics (Agamben 1995; Malkki 1995, 2015) – reduced, through vulnerability assessments, to basic human needs (Azoulay 2019) and yet to become a problem for *humanity* rather than states (Watenpaugh 2015: 169).⁷ In the following section, I turn to the attempts to expand the Nansen passport to Armenian refugees in the Levant. Following how the League’s representatives navigated this attempt in a context beyond Europe, I pay close attention to the initial negotiations of defining – along questions of responsibility – the refugee category itself.

The Problem of Legal Status: Contesting Visions among Refugees and Delegates

Fieldnote, Amman, March 2022

It’s a few months after Ashraf arrived in Europe. I am spending the day in Azraq refugee camp when he texts me. We decide to have a videocall once I am back in Amman the same evening. During the call I ask him whether he has talked to Said lately. ‘He always tells me he is busy’ Ashraf says. It upsets him that Said has somewhat disappeared and that they don’t talk as much anymore. But he knows why that is. It is because Ashraf travelled without him. Yet, Ashraf tells me that he waited for Said to take a decision whether he should leave or not, but that he, in the end, could not jeopardize his family’s resettlement dossier at the UNHCR. Realizing that Said was not going to travel, Ashraf explains, he had to leave without him.

Between 1924 and 1929, the League of Nations sought to extend the Nansen Passport to Armenian refugees, who – as a consequence of massacre, dispossession and expulsion during the fall of the Ottoman Empire – had fled to the Levant, mainly to the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon. This process of relocation and forced displacement had been ongoing since the Armenian Genocide in 1915 (Watenpaugh 2015). Although many relief associations and organizations – together with the League – had provided shelter and other kinds of relief, with time, the question of Armenians’ legal status became more pressing. Although the Nansen Passport was to some extent used as a travel document in Europe until the end of the Second World War, extension attempts beyond Russians and Armenians were generally opposed and failed due to a lack of governmental will. The Nansen Passport was issued by the member states of the League themselves and gave its holders the ability, not the right, to travel between nations – echoing the common sense in contemporary refugee governance that the criteria for third-country resettlement are set by the resettlement countries themselves. Although differing today between the UN member states, it is vulnerability assessments that reduce refugees’ experiences to human basic needs, making possible the materialization of third-country resettlement

as a *provision* that can be taken away from them, or not granted at all (Azoulay 2019). Indeed, it is almost always not given at all. The number of resettled refugees is so small (UNHCR 2022) that the chances of being considered eligible are almost as remote as ‘winning the lottery’ (FitzGerald 2019: 3). Attentive to states’ varying and ever-changing criteria, refugees are well aware that any change in their dossiers may undo their resettlement eligibility. In many of my encounters in Jordan, people have testified to both eligibility delays and withdrawals in relation to documentary adjustments. Said, for instance, knew that if he were to travel to Belarus he would have to be ‘removed’ from his family’s dossier, which consequently would generate a reassessment of their eligibility. Having already waited for six years since they were first selected for resettlement in 2016, he was not prepared to take that risk. Ashraf, on the other hand, coming to Jordan as a 19-year-old, was registered alone at the UNHCR, and – as a single man – not really considered vulnerable enough for resettlement anyway (Turner 2019). In this respect, in contrast to the UNHCR’s ruling that leaving Jordan meant losing the protection and humanitarian assistance that Syrians’ legal status secured, Belarus was a way for Ashraf to exit the life conditions it produced.

As for the Nansen Passport, Watenpaugh (2015: 167–75) shows how, about 100 years earlier, the motives behind its extension to Armenian refugees differed between the League and the French authorities in Syria and Lebanon, which, I suggest, influenced the procedure of distinguishing the refugee category from other categorical memberships. Here, I trace how delegates’ ‘competing interpretations of law’ (Andreetta 2019: 93) and refugees’ own documentary strategies (Cabot 2012; Nakueira 2019; Tuckett 2018) jointly mediated the categorization, and reduction, of refugees into ‘basic human needs’. While conferences and reports provide a space for definitions and policies to be negotiated and settled between governmental and nongovernmental actors, they manifest and unfold outside of (although never disconnected from) such space. The letters examined in this subsection show how the conferences that examined ‘the refugee problem’ in the early twentieth century took place not only in sequence and as a consequence of each other (Riles 2006) but also through the ‘street-level’ practices and the everyday life that took place between them (Andreetta 2019; Cabot 2013; Horton 2020; Tuckett 2018).

In February 1928, about 2,000 Nansen Stamps were sent to Beirut based on the ‘definite promise’ made by Burnier to sell all of them to Armenian refugees. Disappointed by the outcome, the Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees sent a letter questioning why Burnier had, contrary to what he had advocated for in Geneva, only sold 129 Nansen Stamps (International Labour Office 1926).

In his response, Burnier repeated a point he had made on numerous previous occasions: that the conditions in Lebanon and Syria differed from Europe, making it impossible for the Armenian refugees to pay the taxes for the Nansen Stamps. He also emphasized that Armenians had the right to acquire both Syrian and Lebanese passports, which were cheaper than the Nansen Passport. Hence, it was generally not a document they desired:

Since 1926, I have always made it known to you that the local conditions in Syria and Lebanon, and the regime under which refugees live there, make it impossible to implement the Nansen stamp tax as it can be practiced in European states. It is with great difficulty that we have managed to collect this tax from emigrants, and of course, only from those who possess a Nansen passport. This passport is generally not desired given that Lebanese and Syrian passports are cheaper and that Armenians, under the Treaty of Lausanne, have the right to obtain them. (Ibid.)⁸

This dispute had been preceded by lengthy attempts to impose a tax system through the issuing of so-called Nansen Stamps to be affixed on the already existing identity certificates of Armenians in the Syrian and Lebanese French mandates. The system was motivated by the idea that refugees should ‘pay back’, and thus contribute to the funding of the humanitarian services they were provided with. Such a tax system on Armenian refugees was already in place in France, and commissioners thus envisioned that it could in principle be applied in the mandates too. The challenge, however, was that most Armenians could obtain Syrian and Lebanese citizenship and were thus not in need of any specific refugee identity. This issue was further raised by Thomas Frank Johnson in a minute sheet written in May 1926:

There is however, one administrative difficulty, and that is that the Armenian refugees in Syria are not provided either with Nansen passports or with *cartes d’identité*, on the basis of which the five francs tax could be levied, but it may not perhaps be impossible to devise some means for this purpose, even in case of need by making the taking of the *carte d’identité* by the Armenian refugees in Syria compulsory. (Ibid.)

The fact that the situations in the Near East and France differed was discussed in various conversations between Burnier and Johnson in attempts to overcome the difficulties of imposing the Nansen Stamp on Armenian refugees. In August of the same year, Burnier further explained the situation:

During my absence, there have been no changes in the material situation of the refugees. They still live in the precarious and unstable manner that I explained to you during my visit to Geneva. . . However, their personal status is now definitively

settled. Under the Treaty of Lausanne, all Armenians residing in Mandate States for two years, which applies to all of them, automatically become citizens of the states they inhabit. (International Labour Office 1925)⁹

Additionally, he claimed that since the municipality of Beirut had already collected 160,000 francs from the Armenian refugees by taxing all its citizens, adding another tax system would be extremely difficult to implement. These matters were not without misperceptions or contestations. In a response to Burnier, Johnson expressed his confusion regarding the rather conflicting information furnished around the question:

. . . as pointed out to you by the Red Cross committee with reference to your letter of August 7th. . . you state that all Armenian refugees who have resided in the mandated territory for two years, or practically the whole of the Armenian refugees in Syria, have acquired or have the rights to acquire Syrian nationality. On the other hand, you reiterate that measures are being contemplated for applying the Nansen stamp system through all Armenian refugees in Syria. If, however, the Armenian refugees become Syrian citizens, it would not appear to be possible to require them to purchase the Nansen stamps. In that event our original proposals would require considerable modification. . . . As you may imagine, we are most anxious to have your observations on this somewhat difficult point and particularly as to the interpretation placed by the competent authorities on the relevant article of the Lausanne Treaty (Art 30. Section II). (Ibid.)

In quoting an article of the Lausanne Treaty, Johnson further argued that there was ‘no reference’ to the right of Armenian refugees to obtain Syrian nationality after two years of residence, in contrast to what Burnier had claimed. Rather, he suggested that the fact that Armenians had been able to acquire Syrian nationality was a result of a ‘generous interpretation’ of the article. Further, he raised the problem that the High Commissioner at Beyrouth, who ‘had been instructed to impose the Nansen tax on the Armenian refugees in Syria’, appeared to regard the refugees in line with ‘the meaning of the definition adopted by the inter-Governmental Conference’ held in May that same year, which defined only Armenians *without* nationality as refugees. Stressing the difficulties of appealing for any funding if having to do so in favour for Armenians ‘with Syrian nationality’ rather than Armenians defined as refugees, he warned Burnier,

You will not fail to appreciate the importance [of] attaching to a clear definition of the status of the Armenian refugees in Syria, not only insofar as it concerns measures for the reimbursement of any funds advanced for the settlement of those refugees, but also for the development of that activity. (Ibid.)

‘Social etymologies’, Stoler (2010: 35) suggests, ‘trace the career of words and the political practices that new categories mark or that new membership in old categories signals’. Accordingly, visible in these letters, while the word ‘refugee’ was repeatedly used by commissioners, delegates and deputies to denote emerging non-national subjects (in this case the Russians, following the Armenians), it was never really explained in the documents they produced. *Who* the refugees were seemed self-evident. *What* a ‘refugee’ was, or what kind of membership the category should encompass, was, however, less obvious. The competing understandings regarding whom among the Armenians to define as refugees were linked to the opposing visions of the League and the French authorities. Citizenship, while instrumental in the French mandates for making room for non-Muslim and non-Arab refugees to alter the demography (Watenpaugh 2015: 174), was a *problem* for the League, which needed refugees to remain noncitizens in order to proceed with their activities. More importantly, the parties’ different visions demonstrate how notions of vulnerability unfolded mainly around questions of citizenship. If refugees were to gain citizenship, they would not be considered vulnerable enough for the League to justify the need to implement the Nansen Passport – which would function as a source of continued funds. Other than looking for a measurement to distinguish between refugees and non-refugees, or between deserving and less deserving refugees, as is common sense in the ‘neoliberal face’ (Sözer 2020) of contemporary governance of humanitarian assistance (Feldman 2018; Gatter 2021), in the 1920s the question unfolded, rather, around how to make refugees *maintain*, rather than being maintained by, humanitarian projects. More importantly, the correspondence suggests that Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon were not *without* identity documents and in need of a solution, or at least not a solution of this sort. Rather, coming from a political world that was evidently not theirs, the Nansen Stamp appeared irrational for most of them (Stoler 2010: 26). Accordingly, ethnographic engagement with these archival documents allows for examining not what the delegates, commissioners and deputies knew or not, what they did or not, but the procedures and activities on which their ‘thought-work’ (Heyman 1995) – that is, their different ways of knowing – relied (Stoler 2010: 42). What these letters make visible, then, is that the political world of the League was a rationale in the making. For some parties, the Nansen Passport was the only solution for dealing with people affected by state violence and the dissolution of some nations in the making of others. For other parties, the issue was more complicated. The contesting prospects of how many Nansen stamps could be sold in relation to how they were received by the Armenians in Syria and Lebanon highlight an arena of different perspectives within and between different parties: the League, the French authorities and the refugees alike.

Hence, as participants in an emotional economy where the relationship between different parties, epistemologies and social worlds were still in the making, these letters illustrate the connection between the career of official documents (Riles 2006) and the career of categories (Stoler 2010) – that is, how the refugee category took form at the intersection between policy production and implementation, between conference halls and everyday ‘street-level’ governance.

Conclusion: Durable Marks in Contemporary Paper Realities

The ethnographic space of the archive resides in the disjuncture between prescription and practice, between state mandates and the maneuvers people made in response to them, between normative rules and how people actually lived their lives. (Stoler 2010: 32)

Examining how asylum seekers’ documentary practices affect and (re)shape their spatiotemporal (im)mobility in Jordan, I have followed the life trajectories of many Syrians since our first encounters in 2016. Throughout the years, some of them, like Ashraf, have left Jordan, returned to Syria or gone elsewhere in the world. Most of them, however, like Said, have stayed. When I met Said one afternoon about two weeks after Ashraf had left for Belarus, he told me, ‘When Ashraf travelled, I got sick of this . . . There is no one here, I am alone here.’ For years, Ashraf and Said shared the same legal status and, although many of their experiences differed, they shared a similar experience of being *there*, together, in Jordan – and of aspiring to a life elsewhere. That Ashraf had left reminded Said that he had not, forcing a sense that their shared experience was now different – a ‘difference’ I have sought to unsettle in this chapter.

Attending to the ethnographic space of the archive, I have examined the processes through which the first legal refugee identity certificate took form, and the regulations of mobility that unfolded alongside them. In an attempt to unsettle ‘our habits of studying the shared world through political concepts and categories’ (Azoulay 2019: 15), I have in parallel combined ethnographic engagement with those who live with the durable marks of these processes today. While refugees’ right to mobility in the present is closely linked to *how* vulnerable one is, the correspondence examined in this chapter testifies to a time when present notions of refugee vulnerability were yet to take shape. Yet, demonstrating such difference is less about distinguishing the past from the present than it is about unsettling the categorical conventions on which we rely when we study processes of humanitarian governance today. Examining the archive and the contemporary

documentary strategies of Ashraf and Said in tandem, I have attended to the worldviews that guided the deputies' and delegates' bureaucratic 'thought-work' in the 1920s (Heyman 1995) as both the condition through which certain bureaucratic categories came into being *and* the condition through which we as scholars (and bureaucrats in humanitarian and migratory contexts) approach such categories in the present. Questioning the distinction made in the UNHCR information video between third-country resettlement and irregular mobility – and hence also between Said's remaining in, and Ashraf's travel from, Jordan – I have sought to demonstrate not only that migrants' and refugees' experiences are products of the same system but that such a system is a *reanimation* of, rather than a replacement for, earlier systems – systems through which the Nansen Passport has, sequentially and consequentially, become a durable mark in humanitarian governance, and thus also in refugees' and migrants' paper-realities today.

Hanna Berg is a PhD candidate at the department of Anthropology and Sociology at the Geneva Graduate Institute. Her research explores the role of bureaucracy in (re)shaping and sustaining the aftermath of humanitarian emergency interventions in Jordan. Following an ethnographic approach, she works across theoretical conversations on humanitarian interventions, practice and governance in the Middle East region, and anthropology of documents and bureaucracy.

Notes

1. To protect the identity of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms for all names of the persons whose stories I engage with in this chapter.
2. The intended audience for this video comprised Syrian asylum seekers in Jordan. Hence, like all ethnographic material in this chapter, the video was recorded in Arabic. All translations are my own.
3. Although Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Syrian refugees are regarded as asylum seekers (*ṭālibīn lujū'*) – which in Arabic literally means 'seekers of refuge' – this status confirms them as people of concern, and under the protection of, the UNHCR in the same manner as in countries that are signatories of the convention.
4. In conceptualizing 'humanitarian aftermaths', I attend to the bureaucratic procedures through which the slow transformation of humanitarian interventions into development projects is navigated, negotiated and justified – and its effects on the lives of local humanitarians and Syrian refugees.
5. Opening in 2014, Azraq camp is the second largest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, after Zaatari camp that was built in 2012. Officially, Azraq hosts around 40 000 Syrian refugees.

6. Historian Davide Rodogno (2021) provides a comprehensive examination of the imperialist and colonialist ideologies that informed the League and other humanitarian actors' operations in the Near East during this time period.
7. A direction of politics which Fassin (2007, 2012), Malkki (2015) and Ticktin (2014), among others, have explored extensively.
8. 'Depuis 1926 je vous ai toujours fait savoir que les conditions locales de la Syrie et du Liban et du régime où y vivent les réfugiés rendaient impossible l'application de l'impôt du timbre Nansen comme il peut se pratiquer dans des Etats Européens. C'est à grand peine que nous sommes parvenus à faire payer cette taxe aux émigrants et, bien entendu, à ceux seuls qui sont munis d'un passeport Nansen. Ce passeport n'est généralement pas recherché étant donné que les passeports Libanais et Syriens coûtent meilleur marché et que les arméniens, en vertu du traité de Lausanne, ont le droit de s'en munir.'
9. 'Il n'y a pas eu, pendant mon absence de changements dans la situation matérielle des réfugiés. Ils vivent toujours de la façon précaire et instable que je vous ai exposée lors de mon passage à Genève . . . Leur statut personnel par contre est maintenant réglé (sic) de façon définitive. En vertu du traité de Lausanne, tous les Arméniens établis dans les Etats sous Mandat depuis deux ans, c'est le cas pour la totalité, deviennent automatiquement citoyens des Etats qu'ils habitent.'

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