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Life and Precarity in the Border Zone of War: Insights from Ramtha, Jordan

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On the Jordanian side of the border, the Syrian war may not look like the bloody, gory event raging only a few kilometres away. Indeed, apart from a couple of shells that fell on the town of Ramtha and its vicinity in 2015, war as a threat to life in the strict (biological) sense seems to be limited to the Syrian territories. Looked at from its margins, such as Ramtha, the war in Syria is mostly about distant columns of smoke, the occasional sounds of explosions, and the presence of refugees uprooted and separated from their families, and only sometimes injured, tortured or even dead. On the Jordanian side of the border, one could venture to have a picnic in the border-zone village of Dhunaybah overlooking al-Weḥda Dam on the Yarmouk River, like many residents of the area do, or stroll around the agricultural fields overlooking the scenic waterfall in Syrian Zaizoun where some smoke indicating ongoing clashes and militia patrols could still be seen in the distance. In Syrian Dar‘ā, seven kilometres to the north of Ramtha, war as a threat to life is a real possibility, not just a trace from another time and place.

However, if we consider war not only as it relates to biological life, but also to livelihood and the capacity to live a good life, as many Ramthawis did during my fieldwork in 2016-2017, the picture starts looking different and the contrast between Syrian Dar‘ā and Jordanian Ramtha becomes less stark. Of course, as recipients of the first wave of refugees when protests in Dar‘ā were met with lethal force by the Syrian state in 2011, people in Ramtha understood very well how their own lives on the Jordanian side of the border are not threatened in the same way the lives of fleeing Syrians were. Yet, they saw that war as destructive of their own lives as well. Many repeated a common refrain – that their city is dead, and that they themselves felt that they were dead. Given how much the lives and livelihoods of people in the Jordanian-Syrian border zone relied on cross border traffic and the infrastructure that sustained it, the closure of Jordan’s two border crossings with Syria in 2013 and 2015 meant that not only spatial mobility has become restricted, but also the economic and social mobility that characterized life in the border zone. As one interlocutor put it to me: “war is destructive in every way.”

This essay is an attempt to make sense of such prevalent statements by situating them within the particular context in which they were uttered. My larger aim is to make some observations regarding the relation between biopolitical life and the condition of precarity much discussed in early 21st century ethnographies. I draw on the growing anthropological literature on precarity and precarious life but argue for expanding the analytic purview of these concepts from the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism and labour to the temporality of biopolitical life—understood within a future oriented *telos* of progressive material betterment—and the structures of feeling that emerges out of the suspicion that such a ‘good life’ has become impracticable. In doing so, I align the problem of precarity with the promise of security on which the modern state’s claim to legitimacy is premised, and the expectation of such security on the part of citizens.¹ Paying attention to precarious life at the Jordanian-Syrian border, I suggest, brings into stark relief the illusiveness of security as an object of contemporary governmentality caught as it is between geo-political and geo-economic logics of biopolitical life.

Precarious Life, and the Politics of Precarity:

In the past two decades, precarity has emerged as a central concern, both for political activists protesting neoliberal regimes of labour, and for social scientists interested in capturing social life under those regimes. Conceived as a condition of post-Fordist capitalism, the concept of precarity has emerged as a way to capture both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labour as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers. The term circulated primarily among social movement activists in post-industrial societies of Europe, North America, and Japan—places where Fordism was strongest in the twentieth century and which therefore have been most affected by its unravelling (Allison 2012; Neilson and Rossiter 2005). In this context, it referred to the dismantling of full-time, life-long employment under neoliberal regimes, which had the effect of disintegrating social ties and eroding the sense of having a place in the world. As such, precarity is understood as “a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one’s (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community” and where the

¹ For the useful discussion of biopolitical life and how it informs expectations from the state to preserve life, see Catherine June Mills (2013).

relationship between precarious labour and precarious life is understood as one in which “unstable work destabilizes daily living” (Allison 2012, 348–49).

The extent to which the concept could be extended beyond the original context in which it emerged has been debatable. For example, in her ethnography of the urban poor in Rio de Janeiro, Katherine Millar (2018) demonstrates how precarious labour can also be a political choice, and suggests that the concept of precarity should not be extended to the Global South where irregular work has historically been the norm. However, one could also note that precarity has been claimed as a choice in the Global North as well. For instance, for workers in the so-called creative fields since the 1980’s, precarious labour, understood as flexible employment, promised their liberation from the alienating structures of regular work (Puar et al. 2012). Similarly, the European Autonomous Proletarians Movement in the 1970’s saw precarious labour as a desirable form of autonomy from steady regular work, and the Autonomist Marxist thinkers Hardt and Negri (2000) have painted a positive picture of precarization as potentially liberating people from formal jobs and enabling new kinds of politics. The recent shift in dominant Leftist discourse from the Marxist critique of waged labour to the demand for stable labour via the concept of precarity suggests that what is at stake is not so much a distinction between the Global North and the Global South but rather a re-problematization of the good life and political subjectivity, that is globally but unequally distributed. Whereas the traditional Left diagnosed the ethico-political problem of modern life in terms of an estrangement from the self, brought about by industrial capitalism, contemporary Leftists seem to have accepted the material conditions of alienated labour and are now grappling with the problem of labour insecurity. Most have redefined the aims of social justice and the good life in terms of secure labour, while some have embraced precarious labour as potentially liberating.

With this shift from alienation to (in)security, the old distinction between waged (alienated) and unwaged labour has fallen out of relevance. However, empirical research has not always caught up with these conceptual shifts. While much research on precarity has focused on wage labour and subsistence-oriented social-reproductive activities, precarity is equally experienced and claimed by the professional middle class

and, as I shall show below, by those engaged in commerce, trade, and investment – social groups that have traditionally been excluded from Leftist concern. This ubiquity of precarity among groups normally considered privileged requires that we focus our analysis more squarely on experiences of work insecurity and the politics and ethics that emerge from them, rather than on particular kinds of labour.

A different strand of literature has been productive in this regard, focusing less on precarity as an experience and more on its relation to precariousness as a politico-ontological condition vis-à-vis sovereign power. Judith Butler (2015; 2009; 2006), whose philosophical reflections informs much of this literature, argues that precarity is inherently political in the sense that in the exercise of sovereignty and the practice of government certain populations “suffer from failing social and economic networks [...] becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009, 25). This is why, for Butler, precarity must be distinguished from precariousness despite the obvious relation between the two. Such a distinction, she argues, allows us to see that while all human life is precarious by definition (to be born and to live is to be always subject to the possibility of death), certain lives are usually considered less worthy of protection than others (i.e. more precaraizable). Precarity, thus, captures the way in which precariousness is differentially distributed among various populations through regimes of welfare, securitization, and war. Some lives are protected while others may be killed or simply left to die.

There is much to recommend about this ontological take on precarity, particularly in the ways it re-politicizes precarity by connecting bare-life with the good life, and both to sovereign power. However, I worry that defining the concept at this universal level risks missing its historical specificity and leaves us in the dark with regards to how precarity emerged as a problem in the past few decades. By contrast, ethnographies of the experience of precarity have explored both the temporality of precarious life and the historicity of this temporality. Notably, they have highlighted how precarity, as a structure of feeling, is experienced against a normative *telos* of security, progress, growth, upward mobility, and development, which has been the core promise of nation-states and the central characteristic of middle-class subjectivity throughout the 20th

century (Muir 2021). Against this historical background, middle class subjects in the 21st century experience threats to the good life, thus understood, as a state of being stuck in the present, or hopelessness and the lack of a meaningful future. Such experiences of time, in turn, demand particular ways of being and acting in the present, such as waitthood and endurance.

For example, Berlant (2011) describes precarious life in terms of an “impasse” which she defines as “a space of time lived without a narrative genre, [...] a holding station that doesn’t hold securely, but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events but does not know where they are leading.” (199) These affective states and the politics (or anti-politics) of hopelessness that they activate emerge from the continued attachment to an imagined good life, promised by capitalism, that can no longer be realized. Uncertain about where, when, or how what one is doing in the present adds up to a future, the precarious lack the practical knowledge necessary for anchoring their everyday life within larger frames. In this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts do not align with a teleology of progressive improvement, living becomes a matter of getting by (Tsing 2015; Allison 2016). As Muir (2021) and Apostolidis (2019; 2022) point out, the unattainability of progressive improvement does not lead aspiring subjects to give up on the idea of progress as a narrative genre. Rather every frustration to their aspirations is experienced as a temporal rupture, with the effect that crises become just ordinary, or routine, even when the *telos* of progress is upheld as the desired norm.

Rather than a new phenomenon, then, precarity is better approached as a new problematization that reframes social phenomena in new ethics. For example, Apostolidis (2022) notes how migrant workers in the US, who have no legal status, attempt to give meaning and respond to their experience of precarity through a narrative and ethic of “desperate responsibility,” which aligns with dominant moralizing discourses that pit ‘good’ against ‘bad’ workers and map them onto racial hierarchies between ‘Whites’ and ‘Latinos.’ By contrast, Didier Fassin’s (2011) ethnography of welfare

distribution to the poor and the administration of refugees in France associates the politics of precarity with the emergence of a global form of moral reasoning, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, that makes imperative the alleviation of human suffering and misfortune. Here, the politics of precarity involves the externalization of suffering as an appeal to a sovereign whose eventual intervention would alleviate that suffering. In this global regime of humanitarian government, Fassin notes, “the claim to bare life [is] the ultimate way to access political existence” (145).

Fassin’s account of precarity is particularly helpful in articulating the relation between the experience of precarity and the politics of precarity discussed above. The significance of precarity, as an experience and ontology, can only be understood within a discursive regime that makes it politically and ethically consequential – namely, “humanitarian reason.” When someone claims to live a precarious life, they are demanding and expecting something to be done about it in the name of what is now conceived as ‘common humanity.’ This articulation, in turn, allows us to better appreciate the historical novelty of precarity as a problem. While human life has always been subject to misfortune and death, the ethico-political demand and expectation of order and security is only a recent historical development that is intrinsically related to the increasing securitization of life via biopolitics, particularly since the 1990s (Voelkner 2010). It also allows us to appreciate the relation between the problem of precarity and the nation-state as a political form. Because securing life is normatively the task of sovereign nation-states, migrants and refugees, whose claim to state protection is at best limited, have often served as exemplary cases of precarious life and the precarization of formal citizens is often understood as a practical loss of full citizenship – i.e. as ‘refugeeism’ or ‘migrantization’. Therefore, it is no surprise that national borders stand as privileged sites for the study of precarity, as places where the moral demand to secure human life, as such, in the name of ‘common humanity’ meets the state’s prerogative to secure only particular forms of life, and hence particular populations.

Fassin’s ethnography of the administration of refugees at the Sangatte refugee reception centre is particularly instructive in this regard. At the border, he points out, there is a tension between humanitarian reason and the logic of national security,

whereby the figure of the refugee occupies an ambivalent position between hospitality and hostility. Migrants are seen to be potential threats to national security, not only in the sense of public security (i.e. the threat of terrorism), and to the security of the nation's identity, but also as a threat to social security where immigration is seen as a threat to hard-won rights to jobs, education, and various welfare benefits. Hence, in France, as in the rest of Europe, where the sovereign is clearly a nation-state, debates around the right policy towards refugees often revolve around the distinction between 'real' refugees who are 'truly' bereft of protection to life in their own countries, and mere 'economic migrants' whose life is not considered to be under threat in the same way, and whose protection should, ultimately, be the responsibility of their own nation-states.

I offer this theoretical reflection, both as a way to situate the ethnographic case of Ramtha within the literature on precarity and to reflect on my own positionality within this ethnography, and hence, on the way my interlocutors presented themselves to me during fieldwork. In contrast to France, and the rest of Europe, where the sovereign to which the precariat could appeal is a nation-state, northern Jordan was a place where both Syrian refugees and Jordanian citizens could equally appeal to international organizations and donors. This was, in part, due to Jordan's long history of receiving refugees (Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, various nationalities after the Iraq war in 1991, and then Iraqis in 2003) and the Jordanian state's position vis-à-vis the international economy of humanitarianism. In contrast to European countries where refugees were seen as a threat to the national economy, and hence to the welfare of citizens, Jordan's dependence on foreign aid, including humanitarian aid, meant that its economy stood to benefit from the waves of refugees it received over the years. Indeed, almost every war and every wave of refugees into Jordan was followed by a boost to the economy as aid money and investment poured in (cf. Moore and Parker 2007).

In the early years of the Syrian war, the Jordanian government declared the north of Jordan as a disaster area due to the arrival of about 1.3 million Syrian refugees the majority of whom lived in urban centres rather in refugee camps supervised by the UNHCR. This declaration opened the door for the Jordan Compact during the London Conference in 2016, when I started my fieldwork, where European States and the UN

pledged \$1 billion in grants as aid to Jordan with an additional \$1.1 billion in the form of soft loans from international development banks. The aim was to turn the refugee crisis into a development opportunity for Jordan and to convince Syrians not to continue their journey to Europe by providing employment opportunities for them. As two leading figures behind the Compact explain (Collier and Betts 2017), the plan was nothing short of a radical rethinking of the global humanitarian system whereby humanitarian aid was to be modelled on development aid. This, in turn, invited a closer involvement of donor countries in the administration of aid. Local municipalities that received funding were closely monitored by donors to make sure that the money they received was spent on projects that would benefit both the local community and the refugees, not Jordanians alone.

This coupling of international development and humanitarianism meant that the sovereign to which people could appeal was more ambiguous and the distinction between refugee and citizen was differently articulated than in Europe. Here, formal citizens could appeal to international donors organizations as rightful recipients of humanitarian aid in a way that resembled refugees. It also meant that when I arrived for my fieldwork as a researcher at a German institution, one of the donor countries, my interlocutors addressed themselves to me as a possible conduit who could eventually relay their suffering to international donors. This created a condition in which the politics of precarity were highly salient, and whereby my interlocutors were keen to talk to me about their suffering. Hence, the frequent claims to them being “dead” can be understood in this context as a claim to being reduced to bare life as an appeal for sympathy in the same way that Syrian refugees did. Officials, in particular, were keen to talk at length about the economic effects of the closure of the border at a time when the influx of Syrian refugees was putting immense stress on public infrastructure with the expectation that what they report to us would be relayed back to “Germany”.

Yet, as I shall show below, this claim to bare life was not cynical or merely metaphorical but is rather premised on the nature of biopolitical life within which claims to precarity are intelligible, albeit with reference to forms of work not usually discussed in the literature on precarity. Whereas much of the literature on work precarity has

focused on the casualisation of labour under neoliberal economic regimes, and within national boundaries, less attention has been paid to forms of life and work that require free movement across those boundaries such as commerce, transport, and logistics – the primary forms of work in Ramtha. Unlike other Jordanian towns where most people depend on employment in the various state functions, such as the civil service, police, army and other parts of the security apparatus (Massad 2001; Alon 2007; Tell 2013), the inhabitants of Ramtha rely mostly on trade and work in the transportation sector and related businesses. During the 1970s and 1980s, when the Jordanian public sector was growing exponentially and incorporating a large part of the Transjordanian population, the people of Ramtha found employment in the growing trade and transport sector that developed during the Iran-Iraq war when the Jordanian port of Aqaba served as Iraq's main access point to international markets (Moore and Parker 2007). That situation changed very little after the first Gulf war in 1991 and the imposition of economic sanctions against Iraq as Ramtha traders and truck owners could find new routes to work on. The creation of a free economic zone and a second border crossing further east, in the late 90s, marked a major shift in the political economy of the whole Jordanian-Syrian border zone and particularly the city of Ramtha. Apart from the existing transport and trade with neighbouring countries, the Joint Syrian-Jordanian Free Economic Zone became a central node in a transport corridor running from the Syrian port of Ṭarṭūs on the Mediterranean to the Jordanian port of Aqaba on the Red Sea which served as a more efficient short-cut alternative to the Suez Canal in Egypt which has become a global chokepoint. The old border crossing, in turn, became an informal free trade zone when visa requirements between Jordan and Syria were lifted in 2007. Cab drivers trafficking passengers across the border became an informal logistical network for a booming market in Ramtha, where Syrian products were sold for low prices compared to those formally imported into Jordan. All this activity, however, stopped with the start of the Syrian war in spring 2011 and the closure of the border crossings from the Jordanian side.

In the next section, I provide ethnographic descriptions of the experience of precarity in a transport hub like Ramtha. In the final section, I turn to the politics of precarity that emerge out of a situation in which the state is not the only or final,

addressee. I reflect on the implications this situation has for our thinking about precarity in general. To put the relation between empirical investigation and theorization in this way is to underscore a couple of methodological points. First, I take it that all our thinking and theorizing is located within discursive-practical spaces that we share with our interlocutors. When interlocutors in the field talk about themselves and their lives, they do not simply ‘open up’ or disclose themselves to us, but rather perform themselves in socially meaningful ways and invite us to inhabit their world and to respond to their performance in significant ways. This encounter is the ground for all our intellectual reflection. Elucidating the presuppositions that undergird it is a necessary step in the intellectual activity which we call critical thinking. Second, our thinking is situated within academic discursive-practical contexts which are equally constitutive of the knowledge we produce but which we do not necessarily share with our interlocutors in the field. This includes disciplinary commitments, professional goals, and debates within communities of experts concerned with particular concepts and questions. Critical thinking is, thus, a multi-scalar activity that seeks not simply to produce better theory, but to intervene in the various fields of practice we inhabit. Thinking about a familiar problem like precarity through a marginal place like Ramtha offers a unique vantage point from which we can evaluate and rethink the conceptual tools we have at our disposal, and hence to open up new possibilities for action.

When Life Stands Still: An impasse in the border zone

Apart from a man rushing out with a document in hand, perhaps in need of photocopying before the end of workday, there are little signs of any work activity at the Ramtha Car Registration Department. Behind the counters sit a couple of clerics sipping tea, chatting and occasionally staring at their watches waiting for their workday to end—still a whole hour away. Once bustling with car buyers and sellers from the Syrian-Jordanian Joint Free Zone, the car registration department now sees less than a handful of transactions a day, mostly from the town itself. The little service shop housed in a prefabricated structure outside the gate was just as lifeless, apart from the hurried steps of the same man with a document in hand, this time running in the opposite direction towards the department. Inside the kiosk, a man in his mid-thirties bent over a plastic table, ball-point pen in hand, notes down what the last customer had bought and

how much he had paid. A woman, dressed in a black robe and a colourful headscarf, stands behind a counter-top gas stove preparing coffee for the customer. I ask the man about how work was going. “Yes,” he says as if he had rehearsed the answer many times before and was only waiting for the prompt. “Do you call this a registration department? Does this look like a registration department to you? Have you seen anyone there? No one came here since the morning.” The woman interjects as if to sum up the situation “The town here is dead!” and the man confirms, “Completely dead! Completely!”

The woman, Umm Mu‘taz, was a single mother with two handicapped children who lived on social welfare from the Ministry of Social Development. The kiosk was additional help she received after petitioning the Royal Court. “It was a *makrumah* (gift) from the King!” she explains. In the past two years, however, business has dwindled since the Jābir border crossing with Syria was closed in 2014. On good days prior to the closure, she used to make 100 Dinars, but now she makes less than ten, hardly enough to cover the cost of a gas container. “Don’t you give out loans?” she asks half-jokingly when she knows that I worked for a German institute. When I answer her in the negative, she immediately adds “Do you give visas then?” The man, Maḥmūd, started working in the kiosk two years ago after the Syrian-Jordanian Free Zone and the border crossing were closed and he lost his job as a shipping clearance officer. He had been working in the same job and the same company for ten years prior to that, and was later relocated to work at the Northern Crossing with Israel. His monthly salary of 200 Dinars seemed fair at Jābir, along with the 100-300 Dinars he was getting in tips per day. However, the same salary was not sufficient to keep him at the Northern Crossing where he sometimes spent more than twelve hours a day to complete just one or two clearance jobs. When the company he worked for was shut down, he was offered a 500 Dinar compensation. He sued his former employer and managed to win a 3,700 Dinar compensation instead. The employer, however, had not enough money to pay him, and after two years of haggling, they settled for 2,000 dinars.

Most clearance companies in the area have laid off their employees and either shut down their business or continue to exist on paper only. It was not the closure of

Jābir alone that was to blame. Ramtha, the other crossing point with Syria was also closed, and so was the Karāmah crossing with Iraq. This effectively meant that the ‘Umarī crossing with Saudi Arabia and the free zones in Zarqa and Saḥāb had very little traffic as well. Maḥmūd estimates that about 500 other clearance officers have lost their jobs since traffic across the border started slowing down which culminated in complete closure in 2015. Some have found small jobs like his at the kiosk, but many were still jobless. For shipping clearance workers like Maḥmūd, the slow pace of their current life stands in sharp contrast to the fast rhythms they had prior to the Syrian crisis and the closure of borders.

A few kilometres away, at the Ramtha market, many shops remained closed by noon. A seller in one apparel and shoes shop complains to another, a Syrian employee working at a nearby shop, that he has not sold anything since the morning. The Syrian responds that his boss had not even bothered to open the shop yet. “Ramtha is dead! The whole country is dead! Our life has stopped.” They pronounce, “Look at the shops, look at the streets, they are all empty!”

Against this image of a present in which life that has come to a halt stands the memory of a past, not so distant, in which life was flourishing and moving. Before the Jordanian-Syrian borders were closed, at that same time of the day, the streets would be full of shoppers, merchants and cars. The shops would be full of goods from Syria: garments, beddings, lingerie, shoes, dried fruits and sweets, cigarettes, and meat. Memories of Ramtha prior to the Syrian crisis depict it as buzzing with commercial activity, and, for those who took part in that activity, with profit and social mobility. Individual shoppers and retailers came from all over Jordan to buy the Syrian products which a fleet of cab drivers known as *al-Baḥḥāra* (literally: sailors) trafficked across the border. Unlike the markets of other Jordanian towns, the Ramtha market functioned more like a wholesale and distribution centre for merchants in other towns, including the capital Amman. Over the years the market has grown organically into several quarters each specialized in certain kinds of products: groceries, paper products, detergents and hygiene products, cigarettes, beddings and apparel. Next to the shops selling Syrian products stood others selling Jordanian ones, but the heart of the Ramtha market was

the *Bahḥāra* market in which Syrian products were sold often at lower prices than in Syria itself. The closure of the Ramtha border crossing in 2013, two years after the beginning of the Syrian crisis, meant that those products could no longer make it to the market in Ramtha. While many shops have since stacked their shelves with Chinese products imported through the Red Sea port of Aqaba, these same products were being also sold in other towns. There is now little reason for shoppers to go to Ramtha anymore.

The movement of *Bahḥāra* between Jordan and Syria marked the daily rhythm of the market around which a whole web of actors and activities were coordinated. On average, merchants made trips to Syria every ten days. A merchant would leave early in the morning after the *Fajr* prayers and arrive in Damascus by the shops' opening hour around 8am. He would spend the day in Damascus visiting his network of suppliers and making the orders. By 'Ishā' prayers at the end of the day he would be done with his business in the city. The next day he would travel up to Aleppo, spend a day in the market there, and from there the next day back to Homs. At the end of the third day he would head back to Ramtha to attend to his shop the next morning. By then, the orders he had made in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs would have been delivered to an *Istirāḥa*, one of many pit-stops along the highway between Damascus and the Jordanian borders. There, the goods would be stored until picked up by one of the *Bahḥāra* working on the route. Each *Istirāḥa* owner dealt with a number of *Bahḥāra* drivers whom he knew personally and trusted. The driver would leave Ramtha early in the morning, arrive at the *Istirāḥa*, load the delivery into his car and head back to Ramtha to arrive and deliver by the beginning of the workday at 8am. But apart from the deliveries which the *Bahḥāra* drivers made for the merchants, they also smuggled with them cigarettes, meat, medicine and other valuable goods which they delivered to their own networks of shops and individuals.² By 9 or 10am, the goods would be unpacked and put on display to be sold when individual shoppers and retailers would start flocking into the market.

² An entire street in the Ramtha market was comprised of tobacco shops, which functioned as distribution centers for the whole northern region.

It was the suspension of this activity and incessant movement that people referred to when they compared the market today with what it used to be a few years ago and declared life in the city to have stopped. Of course, time was still filled up with 'normal' activities, like opening the shops, sweeping the floors, dusting off the shelves, sipping coffee and tea, smoking, and arguing with the street vendors who have occupied the spaces outside with display stands that, by then hardly had any merchandise to display. Yet, it was not clear what these various activities added up to. If, in the past, dusting off the shelves and sweeping the floor, or clearing the space outside the shop took place in preparation for buying and selling, by now, these activities seemed to be continuing by sheer inertia. The larger narrative frame within which they took place (buying, selling, profiting, and social mobility) has become impracticable.

Looking beyond the movement of goods across the border, however, and into the lives and livelihoods of people which this movement sustained one can start seeing another sense in which "life has stopped." As merchants in the market often explained to me, "People are a network." There were 104 Jordanian cabs from working on the Ramtha-Dar'ā route and delivering goods to the market. Border authorities on both sides allowed each driver to make one trip only back and forth every day while a car was allowed to make two. This meant that around 200 Jordanian drivers worked on the route, with a similar number from the Syrian side. But apart from those drivers and their families, the network included merchants in the Ramtha market and those who worked for them, as well as the retailers whom they supplied and the individuals who shopped there. All these were part of the social network that relied on the daily rhythm of *Bahḥāra* traffic, and so did their livelihood. As one merchant explained to me:

The ordinary citizen used to buy cheese for 2 dinars per kilo instead of 6 in the local market, a kilo of meat was 4-5 dinars instead of 11, a pair of jeans was 5-7 dinars instead of 15-20. A family that did its shopping in Ramtha saved at least 50-100 dinars per month which they could use for other purposes such as teaching a child, or for healthcare, or a car instalment.

Good life under the regime of capitalist nation-states is very much understood as the capacity to consume and the ability to make investments whose returns in the future are relatively guaranteed. It is not that crises and mishaps did not take place. They did, of course, and this was understood to be part of the risk involved in any investment. Yet, the extreme uncertainty that the closure of the border brought about meant that such crises were now the norm rather than the exception. At the same time, merchants continued to evaluate their lives in relation to the narrative of progress. Measured against this standard, the closure of the border meant that life, for all those who benefitted from the traffic of goods across the Jordanian-Syrian border, has come to a halt in the sense of a lack of any assurance that present investments will be rewarded in the future. In the light of the seemingly unending Syrian war, the resumption of that life looked increasingly unlikely, and so did the return for investment on the part of the merchants.

Many merchants in Ramtha continued to import goods, particularly garments, from Syria after the crisis had started in the spring of 2011 and before the closure of the borders since 2013 using the usual land routes. This was despite the fact that the production and supply networks on which they relied in the past were largely destroyed. Their biggest problem, however, became securing those shipments. Many have lost goods when parts of their shipments were confiscated at various checkpoints along the way. Given the lack of security and the uncertainties involved in the shipping via land routes, some merchants have switched to buying goods from regime-controlled areas in Aleppo and along the Mediterranean coast and shipping by sea from Ṭarṭūs to Aqaba. This option, however, has been largely inefficient and uncertain, albeit in ways different from the land routes: Instead of taking less than one day as it did in the past, a shipment now took up to 3-3.5 months to arrive in the Jordanian Red Sea port Aqaba from the Syrian Mediterranean port of Ṭarṭūs. In most cases, it was difficult to know beforehand how long a certain order would take to be delivered. Shipping something from Syria was now fraught with much anxiety and uncertainty that extended over the weeks it took for a shipment to arrive. Even when it did there was the chance that some items in the

order would turn out to be of lower quality than expected. While in the past merchants used to go to Syria, inspect the products personally before ordering, they now needed to rely on buying over the internet by way of photos which could be easily manipulated. For merchants, the closure of the border meant a massive slow-down in the cycle of buying and selling, and extreme uncertainty as to how things will turn out in the end both for their investments, and for their daily lives.

Unlike the big Amman-based importers, wholesale merchants working at the Ramtha market prior to the Syrian crisis did not need large sums of capital to start a business or to run one. This was partly because their Syrian products cost less to procure and ship in small quantities than products from other countries like China which needed to be transported by way of container ships through the port of Aqaba—hence, in larger quantities and over a longer period of time. The low cost of shipping that the informal *Baḥḥāra* supply-chain network provided also allowed small merchants in the Ramtha market to import in large quantities because all the costs were operational and those operational costs were low. A shipment which cost a few hundred dinars to deliver with the *Baḥḥāra* in the past now costs 5000 dinars by sea. Moreover, merchants following the regular formal import procedures would not only have higher costs but would also need a large initial capital deposited in banks as security.

More importantly, small merchants could work in Ramtha prior to the border closure because the efficient *Baḥḥāra* supply-chain network allowed them shorter working-capital-cycles. In the past, a merchant could make the orders, receive the goods, sell them at a profit and be ready for another round of procurement from Syria within a few weeks. Essentially, the closure of the Syrian border did not mean that merchants could no longer import Syrian products. Rather, what the Syrian war and the change of route meant ultimately was that the capital cycle has become much longer and the supply-chain less secure. With the closure of the border the small merchants of Ramtha were being completely driven out of the market because shipping costs have increased, shipping times have become much longer and so has the time needed for retailer customers to pay for their purchases which were now made on credit and paid

with future dated checks to cover the longer capital cycle. Without the large capital to cover the longer working-capital cycle, a merchant could not survive.

For many merchants, one way to cover these longer cycles was to tap into and liquidate assets they have purchased in the past and use them as an investment into the future. Yet, after five years of war in Syria that investment seems in vain. As one merchant described to me:

Things have reached the danger zone now... I have sold everything I could rely on. I have sold my car, my wife's gold, nothing is left... And this is all to keep the business standing on its feet in hopes that Syria will open again... But I realized that I am living a fantasy... And it will remain a fantasy by the way!

Significantly, the assets into which people tapped were often the same assets which in the golden days of ongoing trade signified social mobility and optimism about the future. By liquidating those assets, and making investments without any guarantees for returns, the future not only looked uncertain, but also increasingly grim. Nonetheless, the strong suspicion that investments made in the present are unlikely to yield returns in the future did not lead to a radical questioning of the *telos* of progress. Rather, attachment to it was maintained, albeit with a sense of fatalism. In a sense, my merchant interlocutor felt he had no choice but to make such investments even when he knew that a return to normalcy, when “Syria would open up again,” was unlikely.

This desperate attachment to an increasingly fantastical narrative of stable profit and progress was, in part, an attempt to keep meaningful one’s daily activities. Without such a framing these daily activities would be senseless. But it was also an attempt to make sense of one’s entire life and trajectory. For many Ramthawis, the narrative of material progress was tied to a narrative of personal growth. As the same merchant quoted above put it to me,

You know, if you had a carton of eggs and one of them fell, you'd feel upset, so how would you feel when you lose a trade business you've

been building since 1997? We were little kids in 1997, we called ourselves "Smurfs"... We used to go get cigarettes, milk and cheese. Back then an army officer used to make 90 dinars a month. We used to make 50 dinars a day! It is not easy to see something you have built for your whole life being destroyed! But destruction is coming, no doubt!

Notably, the merchant understood himself and his life trajectory as intimately intertwined with the fate of his business. His growth from a child, or a "Smurf," to an adult mirrored the growth of his business and income over the years. The loss of that business amounted to a loss of that growth from childhood to adulthood. To be sure, biological life continued to be lived for this merchant as it did for everyone, but its trajectory was now less certain. The fatalistic temporality of compulsive investment with the expectation of loss, which characterized trading in the aftermath of the Syrian war, was projected onto life more broadly. It is as if he continued to live his life but rather than marching from childhood to adulthood, he was now compulsively yearning for growth while paradoxically moving towards an inevitable death.

This temporality of precaritized time, characterized by a compulsive and fatalistic march towards death, extended well beyond the merchants themselves. This is because the closure of the border amounted to a broader breakdown of the infrastructure and networks of circulation on which life in the border zone depended. "People are a network," as many of my interlocutors kept reminding me, and this network included the whole logistical and social infrastructure on which trade relied.

This included the Baḥḥāra whose daily trips between Syria and Jordan constituted the core of commercial activity in the city and the network of pit-stops through which they operated. Previously, a Baḥḥār driver would make a trip to one of the Istirāḥa pit-stops on the highway to Damascus and bring in a load of goods to deliver to the market for fees as little as 100 dinars for a full load of packages. Between the packages, he could smuggle a few slaughtered lambs, cigarette cartons and some

alcohol into Jordan. Selling those goods in the Jordanian market, the driver could make up to 2,000 dinars in profit in a single trip.

The possibility of making such profit ceased with the closure of the border. While the Jordanian state allowed those drivers to switch their licenses from the Ramtha-Damascus route to other routes within Jordan (Amman-Ramtha or Zarqa-Ramtha, for example) or turn them into regular taxis, the switch did not amount to the same possibilities for profit. Given that Jordanian law requires that public transport vehicles be no more than five years old, the switch also entailed extra cost of purchasing newer vehicles. Most *Baḥḥāra* opted to keep their old cars and convert them to private vehicles while continuing to use them irregularly and illicitly as cabs in the vicinity of Ramtha. Not everyone could make that switch, however. Drivers who owned large SUV's were making most profit prior to the closure of the border because their vehicles afforded them to transport larger quantities of goods. For those, switching their licenses to other routes inside Jordan or into taxis was not viable because the running costs of those cars were too high and the revenue too little. Most of these cars were re-routed to the Ramtha-Saudi Arabia route through al-ʿUmarī crossing which was already seeing less traffic due to the closure of the border crossings with Syria and Iraq. Further, on this route, a vehicle is only allowed to make one trip every three days. Many of these drivers have resorted to smuggling gasoline and diesel fuel by installing additional fuel tanks on their vehicles but were closely monitored and punished by Saudi border control for doing so. Like the merchants, the *Baḥḥāra* continued to make risky investments which, while potentially profitable, were more likely to yield significant losses: excessive fines, suspension of licences, and even the loss of entire vehicles when they were dismantled by border police searching for smuggled goods.

Addressing Precarity: The illusiveness of security and the uncertainties of sovereignty

If the experience and politics of precarity, as I have been arguing in this essay, is predicated upon security as a political norm and a moral expectation, then the case of Ramtha presents a situation where the quest for security, as such, appears to be paradoxical in ways not encountered at the European or American border. At the European border studied by Fassin (2011), the quest for national security plays out through the figure of the refugee. The tension there is between the moral injunction to secure human life as such, and the logic of national security, which prioritizes securing the nation. There, the question then becomes who among those non-nationals ‘deserves’ humanitarian protection and on which grounds? Who is a true refugee and who is a mere economic migrant? Such conundrums are also present at the Jordanian-Syrian border, of course, but here the state’s project of national security itself appears more elusive. Here, the state’s decision to close the border was made precisely in the name of national security, to protect the nation from the possibility of terrorist attacks or the influx of refugees who would strain the national economy and infrastructure. By doing so, however, the state rendered precarious a form of life whose survival depended on the ability to move back and forth across the border.

At the same time, given how the question of security is bound up with sovereign power, a border town like Ramtha and a geopolitically weak state like Jordan present a contrasting case to the politics of precarity at the borders of countries in the Global North. Scholars of logistics have noted how, in late capitalism, the project of national security is often caught up between the conflicting demands of geopolitics and geoeconomics (Cowen and Smith 2009). In response, geopolitically powerful states, like the US and European countries, usually respond by extending their borders to incorporate and securitize the transport and supply-chain networks through which people, goods, and capital flow. The US securitization of supply-chain networks studied by Cowen (2014) is one example of this, so is the expansive network of Western humanitarian aid to asylum seekers in third countries. By contrast, geopolitically weak states like Jordan can only control flows within their territories by either opening or

closing the borders. Moreover, the recent coupling of Western humanitarian and development aid, of which Jordan was taken as a 'pilot' case (Collier and Betts 2017), has meant that for Jordanian nationals, the Jordanian state was not the final addressee to whom they appealed to alleviate their precarity.

For several years after my fieldwork, Ramtha has witnessed continuous acts of protests: attacks on security and police buildings by the *Baḥḥāra* demanding a reopening of the borders, street blocks by cab drivers following al-‘Umarī border access restrictions by Saudi Arabia, as well as several suicide attempts on the Damascus highway. The strict border control measures by Saudi Arabia often prompted local protests by the drivers in Ramtha which were sometimes violent, demanding that the Jordanian state intervenes with Saudi Arabia to ease those controls. Such acts of protest display the complex webs through which the politics of precarity play out in the border zone. Here, citizens appealed to the humanitarian reason of their own state as a proxy for what they understood to be the real sovereign in this case, which is another, more geopolitically powerful, state. Similarly, with the designation of the north of Jordan as a disaster area deserving humanitarian aid in its own right, agencies were tasked with devising projects that would provide employment for Syrian refugees and Jordanian citizens alike. This meant that Jordanian citizens could present themselves as precarious subjects to agencies like Oxfam as grounds for making moral claims for receiving aid, often successfully. It also meant that when my interlocutors declared to me that their city was now “dead,” they were not only describing their experience, but also hoping that something could be done to alleviate it. I, at the time a researcher at a German institute, was a potential conduit that could make their narratives circulate in more consequential spaces, something I have indeed done in this essay, even if this was not my primary aim.

All of these acts were forms of precarity politics whereby people presented themselves as humanitarian subjects reduced to bare life in order to gain the sympathy of state officials. However, the final addressee of these pleas was often an ambiguous one. Beyond the Jordanian state, there were humanitarian organizations, donor countries, as well as more powerful neighbouring countries. Approaching precarity from

the perspective of a place like Ramtha, invites a conceptual reconsideration of the distinction between refugee and citizen, as well as the presuppositions of sovereignty as ultimately vested in nation-states.

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