

Identity Provision in Refugee Camp Management

Biometric Technology and Iris scanning in Jordan

By Annette Hijab

June 1, 2019



Figure 1 Zaatari camp, 2014. Annette Hijab

Refugee Camps like Za’atari exist all over the world, and wherever these camps are, they have to follow the laws of the host country, even though many are set up and managed by the United Nations. Nonetheless, Jordan has welcomed large numbers of forced migrants throughout its history regardless of the fact that it is not signatory of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Today, the refugee population accounts for almost 30 percent of the total population with Palestinians and Syrians constituting the major groups of forced migrants. Za’atari Camp is about 2.5 miles by 1.5 miles, and it is broken into 12 districts, possibly constituting the fourth largest city in Jordan, run by the police, the UN and almost 33 non-profit organizations.

In 2012, just in three months, the camp received more than 45,000 Syrians, while the total number of Syrians in Jordan was approximately 230,000. When I first arrived in the Camp on February 2013, the number of people reached 76,000. I was assigned to start working in District 9 as a Community Mobiliser -field mediator- for International Relief and Development IRD - today known as Blumont, which is the implementing partner for UNHCR, so I was always in direct contact with different NGOs operating in the camp and with the community to insure an open flow of communication and dialogue between both sides. I remember my first few days in the camp, when I could not understand the fuss around the registration process. There were many rumors going around this topic, which created a lot of confusion amongst the Syrian community and to a certain extent to the international community as well.



Many Syrians arrived empty handed, with no suitcases or bags, no cards of identification or certificates of marriage or birth. They found that this lack of documentation produced “falling consequences”, including “restricted access to services, such as education and health, limitations on their eligibility to receive humanitarian and development assistance, and restrictions on their movement, as well as a higher risk of exploitation in illegal work.” Of particular note was that any refugee leaving a camp without authorization became ineligible for a government service card, creating a catch for those seeking to improve their livelihoods. As a result, more attention started being paid to identity management in the humanitarian sector, and it is clear that identity provision is a critical tool in refugee camp management.

Iris scan

In 2013, the UN and the British-Jordanian Iris Biometrics company IrisGuard announced to start using Iris scans for registering Syrians. They began rolling out an Iris recognition and payment system that meant refugees could withdraw money and shop with a blink of an eye, no longer needing bank cards or registration papers. UNHCR Jordan was the first operation to introduce iris-scanning biometrics to assist in refugee registration. Today, 98% of registered Syrians are processed using biometric technology.

How does it work?

Iris recognition or iris scanning is the process of using visible and near-infrared light to take a high-contrast photograph of a person’s iris. It is a form of biometric technology in the same category as face recognition and fingerprinting. The machine takes the detailed reading of an eye, once a person has his*her Iris scanned, the system automatically communicates with UNHCR’s registration database to confirm the identity of the refugee, checks the account balance with the financial services, and matches it against hundreds of thousands of records firms– all within seconds.

This is a relatively a ground breaking technology, and it is now the standard means of distributing food aid in Azraq, Za’atari Camp and to Syrians living in Urban areas. This process of establishing refugee identity begins with registration: “the recording, verifying, and updating of information on persons of concern to UNHCR with the aim of protecting and documenting them and of implementing durable solution”. Iris scans, taken when refugees register in the country, are stored in a database kept by the UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, and are being used to verify individuals as they seek assistance from UNHCR and, more recently, other UN agencies like WFP.

Blockchain for Humanitarian Assistance

In recent years the World Food Program WFP has been providing Cash-Based Interventions. This means giving people the means to purchase their own food through banks instead of giving food in-kind to them as it was used to be done in the past. According to WFP, this new method is

less time and money consuming. Houman Haddad introduced the Blockchain for Cash Assistance model which, in the short term, would secure transparency, save time and money, and is directly connected to the Iris scan system.

In a long term, Building Blocks could be an opportunity to tackle a central problem in any humanitarian crisis: How to integrate people without government identity documents or a bank account into a financial and legal system where those things are prerequisites to getting a job and living a secure life? - As Houman Haddad refers to it a digital wallet filled with camp transaction history, government ID, and access to financial accounts, all linked through a blockchain-based identity system. The main driver for the promotion of digital identity in humanitarian response has been the increasing use of cash transfers, and specifically the outsourcing of these services to third-party financial service providers.



Figure 2+3 Zaatar Camp, 2014. Annette Hijab

The architect behind the program, Houman Haddad, hopes to see these Syrian refugees one day be able to transact from a single digital wallet comprised of a record of their purchase history, identification and “access to financial accounts” via a blockchain-fueled ID system, as per MIT



WFP Country Director Mageed Yahia said that “[t]he iris scan payment system has been extremely successful, and we are thrilled that WFP and its partners are now able to serve Syrian refugees living in Jordan’s largest camp through this innovative system. [...] Iris scan technology has reshaped the shopping experience for Syrian refugees in Jordan, making it easier and more secure for them, while also enhancing accountability”.

According to Reliefweb, 145,000 out of camp refugees, a fifth of the registered population, currently receive cash assistance from UNHCR using iris-scanning biometric technology at cash machines to verify their identities. The question is, **by creating a functional identity system for forcibly displaced people, what are the ethical issues facing the efforts to build such digital identity systems?**

The historical roots of modern biometrics are in the identification of criminals, but the war on terror and the so-called global refugee crisis have turned biometrics into a \$13.8bn industry. Advocates of the iris scanning technology claim it allows law enforcement officers to compare iris images of suspects with an existing database of images in order to determine or confirm the subject’s identity. They also state that iris scans are quicker and more reliable than fingerprint scans since it is easier for individuals to obscure or alter their fingers than it is to alter their eyes. Biometric technology in particular is a source of concern for many critics. Some critics say that it could be unsafe, a third party could have access to personal information. As the current version of Building Blocks—the one now in use in Jordan—runs on a “permissioned,” or private, version of Ethereum, which means a central authority decides who can participate. These technologies basically perform the same function as a standard database, except for sharing ownership amongst the entities in power.



WFP/Shada Moghraby Hana Heraki, a Syrian refugee at Zaatari camp, looks into the iris scan camera. ©UNHCR

“The reason we are currently on a private chain is throughput limitations of Public chains and the privacy and security concerns that exist there. For clarity, our Pakistani proof of concept was on a public chain, and based on the learnings, we deployed our Jordan pilot on a private one” Houman Haddad during his presentation at Ethereum Foundation.

Nonetheless, only UNHCR possesses the half of the encryption key that is needed to see an individual’s record, adding that even the IrisGuard which develops the system cannot see it. Eric Töpfer, a researcher at the German Institute for Human Rights, is worried that unauthorized actors might be able to access refugees’ information, or that databases may be authorized for new purposes such as counterterrorism or tracking immigration. So, the risks could be anything from identity theft, on the one hand, to manipulating what we see as the whole identity of an individual, to use that information, to filter out more people that you then target easily, on the other hand. It is also possible to scan iris from a distance or even on the move, which means that data could be collected surreptitiously, without individuals’ knowledge, let alone consent. This innovation of Blockchain regardless whether it saves or puts people's lives in danger; a new partnership will see the expansion of Iris Guard ‘s biometric payments solution in the Jordan region. The company has announced it will receive support from the International Finance Corporation, a World Bank Group member concerned with the advancement of the private sector in developing countries.

Refugees do not have the luxury to refuse the technology: Registration and accessing aid depend on it. A population as vulnerable as refugees fleeing a war zone have little choice over whether they are able to accept or refuse biometric registration while it is understandable that aid agencies focus on the practical aspects of delivering aid to refugees, nonetheless, it is more crucial than ever to give those refugees control over their own identities.

borderline-europe

Human rights without borders e.V.

<https://www.borderline-europe.de>

[mail\(at\)borderline-europe.de](mailto:mail(at)borderline-europe.de)