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Would-be places for displaced Afghans
The UNHCR, landless returnees and the enforcement of the national order

Abstract. This article examines the role of the UNHCR in the launch of a scheme fostering the creation of new settlements across Afghanistan in order to accommodate landless returnees. This project entails substantial engineering, aimed at making life possible in inhospitable areas. It thus involves a battle against nature, as well as engaging with the transformation of the Afghan state. The uncertain future of these would-be towns questions the representations about the relationship between people, space and states implied by the ‘national order of things’, that is, a set of normative representations which naturalize the isomorphism between the members of national polities and the territory of their state of citizenship. The nation-state hardly describes the historical process of the formation of the Afghan state, nor Afghan livelihood strategies based on migration. The difficulty experienced in founding these settlements reveals the power relations at work in the way landless Afghan returnees are made ‘dwellers of the world’, and brings into question the role and capacity of an international agency to challenge those relations.

Keywords: UNHCR, refugees, Afghanistan, place-making, nation-state

Résumé. Quel toit pour les Afghans sans abris ? Le HCR, le retour des gens sans terre et l’instauration de l’ordre national

Cet article aborde le rôle du HCR dans le lancement du Land Allocation Scheme, un programme visant la création de nouveaux villages en Afghanistan afin d’héberger les rapatriés sans terre. Ce projet implique d’importants moyens pour rendre habitables des lieux inhospitaliers ; le processus de lutte contre la nature se double alors d’une transformation de

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l’État afghan. L’avenir incertain de ces ébauches de villages questionne les représentations de la relation entre hommes, espace et États qu’implique l’« ordre national des choses » – représentations qui naturalisent l’isomorphisme entre les membres de communautés nationales et le territoire de leur État d’appartenance. Mais la formation de l’État afghan ne correspond que très peu au modèle classique de l’État-nation, pas plus que les stratégies migratoires de survie mises en œuvre par les Afghans. La difficile création de ces villages révèle les relations de pouvoir à l’œuvre et questionne le rôle et la capacité d’une organisation internationale comme le HCR à y faire face.

Building on the anthropological literature that tackles the social production of place (Lefebvre 1974; Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Turton 2005), this article examines the intervention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) vis-à-vis landless returnees in Afghanistan. Social scientists have mainly studied place-making rationales and practices by examining how refugees and migrants produce places, and what they consider ‘home’ (Malkki 1992; Warner 1994; Van Aken 2003; Hammond 2004). Such literature flourished inter alia as a reaction to the institutionalisation of repatriation as ‘the preferred solution’ to the refugee ‘problem’, with return often portrayed by the UNHCR as ‘going home’. Here, I look instead at the way in which this international organisation endeavours to govern the relationship between people and space, thereby influencing livelihoods, settlement and mobility patterns.

Based on fieldwork carried out between 2007 and 2008 in central Afghanistan, this article examines the role of the UNHCR in the launch of the Land Allocation Scheme. Led by the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, with substantial support from the UNHCR, this programme fostered the creation of several settlements across the country with a view to accommodating landless returnees. The action of the UNHCR is considered in this article as a place-making project. The article examines the rationale underpinning the agency’s project in Afghanistan, the kind of ‘home’ the UNHCR seeks to create for landless returnees, and how this project contributes to shaping the relationship between Afghan people and territories.

It appears that the rationale of the UNHCR’s project in Afghanistan is underpinned by the ‘national order of things’ – a set of normative representations prevailing within the interstate system that naturalize the isomorphism between the members of national polities and the territory of their state of citizenship. The UNHCR’s programmes can be seen to be aimed at placing otherwise displaced Afghans in the only portion of the world’s lands where their settlement is considered to be legitimate. For the sites intended to accommodate landless returnees, this project entails extreme engineering aimed at making life possible in inhospitable areas. It thus involves a battle against nature, as well as engaging with the transformation of the Afghan state. The uncertain future of these would-be towns questions the representations about the relationship between people, space and states implied by the national order. The nation-state hardly describes the historical process of the formation of the Afghan state, nor Afghan livelihood strategies based on mobility. The difficulty in founding these settlements reveals the power relations
at work in the way landless Afghan returnees are made ‘dwellers of the world’, and brings into question the role and capacity of an international agency to challenge those relations.

Would-be towns in the middle of nowhere

In 2007, I had the chance to visit a number of settlements that were being created across Afghanistan through the Land Allocation Scheme.  

These virgin sites were peculiar, first, by reason of their location. Most of the pre-existing villages returnees went back to that I visited were situated close to rivers, in green areas, and had a road leading to the village. To reach the land allocation settlements, however, the traveller would unfailingly need to quit the tarmac road to take a more or less visible dirt track and venture into desert areas, leaving rivers and vegetation behind. One would begin to wonder whether there was any inhabited place in the area at all, until some signs of life would eventually appear.

The first time I visited Beni Warsak, for example, was in the spring. The only people we saw while we proceeded over the sandy ground were travelling in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces vehicle which passed us at high speed – situated in the vicinity of Bagram US military base, the area is so remote that it was chosen by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as the site for a firing range for training. A hamlet made up of a few buildings and tents eventually became distinguishable. The first inhabitants of this would-be settlement were a group of returnee families that had been living in Kabul since returning from Pakistan, squatting in destroyed buildings. These families had been evicted and relocated to the Beni Warsak site by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, because the buildings in Kabul were to be restored.

The only infrastructure available on the site came in the form of two water pumps, one of which was broken. The only business, and the most colourful part of the settlement, was a small sheet-metal hut where a young man sold cigarettes, tomato sauce and washing powder. The plain was swept by a strong wind that whipped up clouds of dust. The only vegetation was constituted by sparse bushes and a few small, dusty kitchen gardens. The land that stretched out to the horizon around the site was not cultivable, nor grazable – precisely the reason why the

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1 This article draws on empirical material collected in 2007 and 2008 while I was working as a Reporting Officer within the UNHCR office in Kabul. In this capacity, I visited several returnee settlements and was able to follow the initial phase of the UNHCR’s engagement in the Land Allocation Scheme. I subsequently undertook a PhD in anthropology. Any views expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

2 Beni Warsak is one of the pilot sites of the scheme. It is situated in Bagram District and is meant to accommodate landless returnees from Paghman and Panshir Provinces.
Ministry of Agriculture had transferred it to the Ministry of Refugees. On top of this, the surrounding area was mined: at the door of a house sat a young girl who had recently lost one leg while fetching brushwood. It was difficult to imagine how anyone could possibly eke out a living here. The informal market of the capital was far away, and the chief district was a three-hour walk. As an article published at the time by the UNHCR itself stated, this place was still ‘in the middle of nowhere’ (UNHCR, 2007b).

When I visited the site again in autumn, it had changed radically. The area where just a few months ago dust reigned supreme had received a kiss of life, aimed at transforming it into a dwelling place. The UNHCR, after a period of internal debate, had decided to take the settlement in hand and foster its development. The technical committee of the Land Allocation Scheme, charged with assessing the viability of the sites, approved the area as one of ten pilot sites. The Afghan Ministry had already received tens of thousands of applications for a parcel of land, thousands of families had already been selected, and their plots had been demarcated.

Traces on the sand indicated the frequent passage of vehicles. The Ministry for Public Works was building a tarmac road. Tents had disappeared and, all around, one noticed the signs demarcating new parcels, the foundations of new houses, and many bricks drying in the sun. A mobile clinic run by the Ministry of Health called twice a week. The United Nations Mine Action Service was demining the area. An NGO had dug wells and built more water pumps. Another NGO was running the primary school in tents, pending UNICEF involvement. In addition to directly funding a number of shelters and distributing emergency items, the UNHCR had assumed a central role, coordinating and monitoring the development of the site, liaising among donors, Afghan ministries and NGOs, and striving to attract more donors and agencies.

However, as months went by, the fate of Beni Warsak and most of the other sites appeared to grow more and more uncertain. Basic services, including water and health facilities, were still unavailable, their supply hampered by logistic difficulties and lack of coordination among the numerous ministerial, international and non-governmental bodies involved. The lack of public transportation continued to make it extremely difficult for inhabitants to leave and return to the site. Making life possible in these arid and remote areas still seemed close to performing ‘magic’ (UNHCR 2007b).

By reason of the difficulty and uncertainty of the success of this project, the UNHCR’s involvement continued to be viewed as problematic and was the subject of internal debate. Some were optimistic and believed in the project; they cited the capacity of adaptation of Afghans and were confident that the site’s relative vicinity to Kabul would make the area valuable in the mid-term. Others were cautious, even sceptical, and questioned whether these sites would ever become liveable places. Recent reports confirm that this scepticism was founded: most of the sites have not taken off and their future continues to remain extremely uncertain (Macdonald, 2011; Majidi, this issue).
It is hard to define Beni Warsak and the other settlements, which have risen up *ex nihilo* on the disadvantaged lands that constitute the only sites at the disposal of the Ministry of Refugees. They cannot properly be called villages – at least not yet. For most, they remain ‘sites’. Sometimes a visitor would let slip the word ‘camp’… The parallels with refugee camps, which represent more familiar forms of settlement by reason of their having been extensively described by researchers and humanitarian organisations, do indeed arise spontaneously. In fact, such refugee camps are also often situated in desert and remote areas, and are created with massive interventions by international organisations and NGOs. I argue that refugee camps and the land allocation settlements can indeed both be ascribed to a specular rationale of place-making within the national order, shaped by international as well as local politics.

**Place, the national order and refugee displacement**

The last century saw the globalization of the state as form of political organisation. Virtually all land above sea level is now divided into discrete and mutually exclusive territorial state jurisdictions. There is no space outside the legal jurisdiction of a state where people may live or move to. The globalization of the state has given rise to a larger political system – the interstate system – that stretches across the globe. This system is organised around the principle of state sovereignty, according to which each state has supreme power to exert authority within its territorial jurisdiction, and around the institution of citizenship, which allocates a portion of the world’s population, conceived as a discrete political community, to one state.

These two principles underpin a set of normative representations which permeate interstate relations and shape the worldview of international bodies. In international relations, states’ jurisdictions are conceived as autonomous and closed systems, as ‘political shells’ (Scott, 2009), within which people and things are governed. In addition, their functioning is assumed to fit the pattern seen in nation-states and representative democracies. The name itself of the United Nations is telling in this regard. As the Preamble of its founding Charter states, this organization was created by the ‘peoples of the United Nations’, through the representatives of their respective governments.

Thus, the interstate system entails a powerful, planet-wide topography, underpinning a specific normative representation about place and the relationship between people and space. On the one hand, statehood offers a prism for conceiving the globe as a single common place and the world population as a single entity. At the same time, by identifying mutually exclusive portions of the world’s territories (state territories) and population (national polities), the interstate system
provides a powerful criterion for the classification of places and people across the planet, as well as for the repartition of people across state jurisdictions (see Malkki, 1992; 1995). The isomorphism between polities of citizens and the territories of their state of citizenship is naturalized. The jurisdiction under which a territory falls is the main feature determining its ‘natural’ place in the world. Citizenship is the main criterion for defining human beings, their social and political membership (national=member, non-national=alien) and autochthony.

Human mobility across state borders challenges the physical correspondence between the location of a person and the territorial jurisdiction of his state of nationality. In this sense, it constitutes deviance from the national order. The physical presence of non-nationals within a state’s jurisdiction is an anomaly that, by virtue of the principle of sovereignty, only states can legitimise at their discretion, allowing entry and regulating status, and thereby establishing the legitimacy and illegitimacy of movements of people across state borders.

The UNHCR, as an international institution created by states and deriving its resources from states, is embedded in the interstate system. The very rationale of the ‘refugee problem’ that underlies the UNHCR’s mandate is embedded in this order, insofar as what defines a refugee as a displaced person is both his or her physical and political separation from his or her state of citizenship (cf. Malkki, 1995).

The figure of the refugee as instituted by international law at the end of World War II refers to a person who has lost the bond with his or her state of nationality, either because that state is the agent of persecution, or because it is not able to protect him or her. Therefore, refugees are people without a place: they have lost their place in the world, i.e. the jurisdiction of their state of nationality, which cannot protect them even from a distance. The lost place in question is as much political as it is physical. In fact, according to the rationale that underpins the ‘refugee problem’, the breaking of the bond with the state of nationality corresponds first and foremost to the lack of a political framework for livelihoods, and for social and political life. People without a place in a world entirely occupied by state jurisdictions are thus necessarily out of place, wherever they may find themselves. They constitute a surplus population in distress. The terms ‘displacement’ and ‘uprooted’, frequently associated with refugees, convey the idea of disorder and of an uncomfortable separation from a location that is presupposed as natural.

Most states agree on the principle that refugee movements are legitimate, and that, by virtue of their humanity, efforts should be made to relieve the distress of refugees. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol testify to this, as does the existence of the UNHCR, mandated to find solutions for refugees. Solutions imply the re-establishment of such a framework – in this sense searching for solutions for refugees can aptly be considered as a place–making project. In a world entirely occupied by state jurisdictions, there is no room outside of these to be created for refugees. Thus, refugees have to be reabsorbed into the interstate system. As illustrated by the three traditional
solutions to the refugee ‘problem’, space has to be found within one or other state jurisdiction, through a process of political incorporation – either in the country of first arrival (local integration), in third countries (resettlement), or in the country of origin (repatriation).

In practice, states remain reticent to soften the arbitrariness of their immigration policies, and refugees’ states of origin are usually weak players in interstate relations. The difficulties the UNHCR confronts in finding a physical and political place for refugees as non-nationals within state jurisdictions are epitomized by refugee camps (localized enclaves often entirely dependent on international assistance), as well as by the sometimes tragic attempts by migrants to evade state border controls. Since the 1990s, repatriation has been upheld by most states and by the UNHCR as ‘the preferred solution’ to the refugee ‘problem’, which has led the UNHCR to engage more with and in those states of origin, and to develop a discourse portraying repatriation as going back ‘home’ (Black and Koser, 1999; Chimni 2004). The rhetoric that accompanies the institutionalisation of repatriation insists on the isomorphism between population and the territory of states of nationality, based on autochthony and origin. Repatriation appears, then, as the solution par excellence, one that brings refugees to their rightful place via the normalization of their position within the interstate order.

**Emplacing displaced Afghans**

Powerful countries established Afghanistan’s borders at the end of the 19th century in order to create a buffer state between empires, and certainly not according to any criteria such as equality with other jurisdictions or the economic viability of the country’s ‘political shell’. Only 12% of the land in Afghanistan is cultivable, and the country’s birth rate is today among the highest in the world. Afghanistan had long remained marginal to interstate relations, until conflict in the country set in, once again fomented by external powers and provoking huge destruction. Widespread conflict and poverty have caused large sections of the population to migrate. Regional migration, favoured by transnational networks based on family, ethnic and religious memberships, has become a survival and/or livelihood strategy for most Afghan households, and remains as such today (Edwards, 1986; Centlivres, 1988; Monsutti, 2005, 2008; Stigter and Monsutti, 2005).

Since conflict began at the end of the 1970s, the UNHCR has faced the challenge of promoting a distribution of Afghan refugees across state jurisdictions, allowing their survival and livelihood, as well as being acceptable for states. Recurring expressions employed by the UNHCR – such as ‘asylum space’ in host countries, and Afghanistan’s ‘absorption capacity’ – show that, for the agency, the main concern is to create a place that is both physical and political for those Afghans who, having left the state jurisdiction of Afghanistan, are non-nationals elsewhere.
Emplacing Afghan refugees is pursued through influencing relations between Afghan non-nationals and host states – that is, through negotiating with the governments concerned the status of Afghan non-nationals and the entitlements they may hold within the jurisdictions of host states. During the 1980s, Iran and Pakistan, the two countries most affected by Afghan migration, adopted a benevolent attitude. This was both in the name of religious brotherhood and, especially in the case of Pakistan, because of the geopolitical conjuncture that saw humanitarian assistance to refugee camps as a way for donors to engage in a proxy war in Afghanistan. The treatment accorded to Afghans by Iranian and Pakistani authorities gradually deteriorated during the 1990s, following changes in the geostrategic context. By that time, the Afghan population had become a structural presence in both countries, offering a cheap workforce as well as a lever for gaining influence in Afghanistan.\footnote{For an historic overview of the political context that influenced the treatment of Afghan migrants in Iran and Pakistan, see Rizvi (1990); Shahraní (1995); Rajee (2000); Turton and Marsden (2002); Coll (2004); Monsutti (2005); Adelkhak and Olszewska (2006); Macleod (2008).}

In the aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban, the Iranian and Pakistani authorities increased the pressure they exerted on the hundreds of thousands of Afghans who, in spite of a large return movement, were still present in those countries. The dismantling of long-standing refugee camps in Pakistan, as well as widespread deportations from Iran, clearly demonstrate this. The UNHCR used several arguments to oppose this stance: invoking the principle of voluntary return; stressing that a new generation had been born and raised in Iran and Pakistan, and knew nothing of Afghanistan; highlighting the importance of Afghan migration both for Afghan livelihoods and for the Iranian and Pakistani economies;\footnote{The UNHCR has acknowledged the importance of migration for Afghan livelihoods and has strived to promote the legalisation of labour migration across the region. However, this endeavour has found little resonance with the UNHCR’s state interlocutors.} and, since 2007, underlining Afghanistan’s shrinking ‘absorption capacity’ (cf. UNHCR, 2007a). However, these arguments proved to be largely ineffective against the discretionary power states claim in the interstate arena in relation to their treatment of non-nationals. Both Iranian and Pakistani authorities have called for the repatriation of all Afghans in their public discourse.

This situation was compounded by increasingly restrictive migration policies in countries further afield. Moreover, the main donors to the UNHCR – most of which formed part of the military coalition that intervened in Afghanistan – were more interested in earmarking their money for returnees to Afghanistan, than for refugees in Iran and Pakistan. Especially in the immediate aftermath of the military intervention, high return flows were welcomed as an expression of popular support. Furthermore, an attempt was made not to displease the governments of Iran and Pakistan given their status as important potential allies in the ‘war on terror’.

As a result of these factors, strong emphasis was placed on repatriation, which has consistently been portrayed since 2002 by states and the UNHCR as ‘the
preferred solution’ in the case of Afghan refugees. The territorial jurisdiction of their state of nationality is the only legitimate portion of the globe to which most Afghans can move and settle without the need for legitimization from other states. The reintegration programme in Afghanistan is the largest of its type run by the UNHCR, and consists mainly in the provision of shelter, water and legal assistance. These programmes can be seen as an endeavour to anchor Afghan returnees within the jurisdiction of their state of nationality, making life and livelihood possible, so that they can remain and cease seeking survival and livelihoods in other jurisdictions.

A space impasse

Logically speaking it is hard to contest the idea that repatriation is the best solution to the refugee ‘problem’: according to the rationale of repatriation, rejoining the Afghan state jurisdiction puts an end to the displacement of Afghan refugees. However, concretely, it is not enough for Afghan returnees to physically enter the Afghan jurisdiction for them to find a context in which they can survive and build a livelihood.

In 2007, the UNHCR mission was becoming extremely difficult: deportations from Iran had never been so frequent and Pakistan was closing two of the largest camps, while renewed instability and fresh fighting in Afghanistan placed the possibility for the millions Afghans still living abroad to find safety and a livelihood in the country in doubt. The UNHCR was confronted with two main constraints: in the words of the agency, these were, on the one hand, the ‘political will’ of the Iranian and Pakistani authorities and, on the other, Afghanistan’s ‘shrinking absorption capacity’. A ‘space impasse’ consequently loomed for the UNHCR.

The main fear among the UNHCR’s officials in Afghanistan concerned landless returnees who would not have returned without pressure and who had nowhere to go in Afghanistan. They would become a ‘surplus population’ that could not be ‘absorbed’. Landless returnees do not have a territorialized portion of land where they may settle, which makes it very difficult to make Afghanistan a proper home for them. The most likely and very undesirable consequence of this would be the creation of spontaneous settlements, which would then become completely dependent on international assistance and raise thorny issues about land tenure.

The only land available to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Refugees is located in the most inhospitable areas. Decades of conflict have resulted in most common and state land being seized by warlords, and the overlapping of several legal systems makes land tenure contested; moreover, since 2001, even unproductive land has become very valuable for the construction of houses, particularly if it is located close to a paved road or a main city (Wily, 2003). As an international organisation, the UNHCR is legally powerless to deal with land, and therefore to influence the political economy of land in Afghanistan. Indeed, the insecurity of land tenure and
the landlessness of returnees are among the greatest impediments to the UNHCR’s housing programme, which is restricted to assisting returnees with valid title to the land on which the shelter is to be built.

This is the context in which the UNHCR became involved in the Land Allocation Scheme. In 2007, the debate on how the agency should position itself vis-à-vis this scheme was intense. On the one hand, the available locations and the Ministry’s modes of implementation were hardly acceptable. On the other hand, the principle of distributing plots of land held considerable potential for the agency, since it had been incapable of assisting landless people up to that point. Faced with strong pressure from neighbouring countries, the UNHCR was ready to explore all possible avenues of increasing Afghanistan’s capacity for absorbing returnees. In addition, the Land Allocation Scheme was appealing to donor countries, more interested in financing innovative reintegration projects within Afghanistan than financing such projects in host countries or in increasing their own resettlement quotas. For this reason UNHCR officials eventually decided to involve the agency in the scheme with a view to taking the reins and focusing on a limited number of pilot sites, striving to make them viable.

The solution found to the space impasse was thus to endeavour to transform ‘nowhere’ into ‘somewhere’ in order to accommodate and anchor landless returnees in the Afghan territory. From the perspective of the interstate order, these small and disadvantaged portions of the globe falling within Afghanistan’s state jurisdiction are legitimate spaces where a project for the permanent placement of Afghan returnees can be pursued.

Placing landless Afghan returnees in Beni Warsak and other land allocation sites constitutes an experiment involving extreme engineering. This not only entails a fight with nature to make inhospitable corners of Afghanistan liveable. It also necessitates incorporating a group of people and a specific portion of land into a state’s jurisdiction. The UNHCR’s emplacement project entails the transformation of both a physical relationship between nature and man, and the political bond between man, the land and the state.

**State-building as place-making**

Fostering the authority of the Afghan state on the Afghan territory and among Afghan people is a crucial component of the UNHCR’s action: the effective and direct rule of the state is considered key to the returnees’ survival and livelihoods, that is, to the sustainability of return. The approach of the UNHCR in this connection is geared towards fixing an institution that does not work correctly. In the case of the Land Allocation Scheme, the engagement of the agency is perceived as redressing a flawed initiative.

This stance is fully aligned with the ‘state-building’ project carried out in Afghanistan by international donors and agencies since the end of 2001. In addition
to promoting the new constitution and presidential and parliamentary elections, these actors have engaged in a process of state engineering, aimed at fostering a state apparatus able to control its territory, with a monopoly of the use of legitimate force, and capable of managing its finances and carrying out public policies. This project includes a vast reform of the whole state administration, underpinned by ‘capacity building’ within its organs.

The UNHCR in particular has long been engaged in a wide range of activities intended to transform the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation into a functioning and accountable body that can oversee returnee issues once the UNHCR leaves the country. Drawing on its financial power and the fact that conforming to its policy directions is key for the Ministry’s access to international funds and legitimacy, the UNHCR uses its influence to sustain the Ministry’s authority while at the same time demonstrating the manner in which policies should be carried out.

This has resulted in a very ambivalent and paradoxical stance, which can also be identified as characterising the broader project led by the ‘international community’ in Afghanistan post-2001 as a whole. International actors operate to uphold the autonomy and authority of the Afghan state, yet de facto continuously undermine it. On the one hand, the international presence results in the fostering of state expansion in a country where the state had a less direct presence in the territory and the lives of the people. On the other hand, the state sovereignty sustained is also undermined by the presence of external actors, which provide funds, decide how they should be spent and shape the state administration.

This is very apparent in the case of the Land Allocation Scheme, where the UNHCR offered the Ministry its conditional support for the development of a selected number of pilot sites. The UNHCR took the reins of the programme with the dual intention of providing material assistance to the Ministry and instilling within that body a sense of responsibility in relation to returnees.

The management of the programme was entrusted to a new unit created within the Ministry, the terms of reference of which were written by UNHCR officials, who also recruited and funded the unit’s staff. The new legal framework was prepared by the UNHCR, which also ensured most of the coordination, management and fundraising tasks. Through its presence within the Ministry and at the land allocation sites, the UNHCR exerted control over the actions of ministerial officials. However, at the same time, everything was done by the UNHCR to sustain the authority of the Ministry and its ‘ownership’ of the Scheme. The Ministry always appeared as the formal author of policy documents and as responsible for policy decisions. This status was upheld in relations with all interlocutors, so that in all public settings the appearance of subordination replaced the UNHCR’s paternalistic guidance and control.

Ferguson, Stepputat and Fresia note a similar process in other post-colonial contexts such as Leshoto, Guatemala and Senegal, where internationally funded programmes foster the expansion of the state (Ferguson, 1994; Stepputat, 1999; Fresia, 2009).
This attitude vis-à-vis this Afghan Ministry represents a crucial component of the UNHCR’s emplacement project. It entails the incorporation of a group of people and a portion of land within the state of Afghanistan’s jurisdiction. The UNHCR’s emplacement project consists in weaving a bond between people, land and the state, and in moulding that bond. The UNHCR thus stimulates and watches over the reworking of the political bond to ensure that it evolves as a democratic state bond between rulers and ruled. The Afghan state is made to rule, the Afghan people transformed into national citizens, and spaces are transformed into national territory. The land allocation sites are transformed into places that are constituent parts of the national territory; landless returnees are transformed into dwellers, as well as nationals.

The recent history of Beni Warsak clearly illustrates this process. Pulled along by the UNHCR, the state enlarges its reach and domesticates virgin land by making it a new administrative unit. Under the attentive eye of the UNHCR, the state administration expands, appropriates its territory and makes its administrative grid thicker: Beni Warsak is integrated and linked to the provincial and national capital by a road, a doctor comes regularly from the chief district town, and all sorts of organisations from Kabul and Parwan come to implement their projects, thereby marking the hierarchies between places within the state territory.

Under the UNHCR’s vigilant gaze, national law is brought to Beni Warsak and rendered operational. The agency thus checks that state representatives enforce the law in practice. For example, when some families refused to pay fees for their land, the agency organised a meeting with the shura and ministry officials to discuss the issue. The UNHCR fully supported the principle that the fee be paid and the property rights settled. The fee is actually very small, and its meaning is first and foremost symbolic: paying it means recognizing the rule of law and state authority.

From a group of people squatting a destroyed building in Kabul, the would-be inhabitants of Beni Warsak are being transformed into a group of Afghan citizens, national subjects linked to a small portion of the Afghan territory by the institution of private property, the guarantor of which is the state. They are to become recipients of public services, with the duty to respect state law. Becoming inhabitants of Beni Warsak entails setting up a bureaucratic relationship to the state that had previously been weaker. In fact, Beni Warsak’s inhabitants have undergone several administrative procedures: the status of returnee, necessary to be entitled to a parcel of land, is certified by the Voluntary Repatriation Form; applicants also need to hold an Afghan identity card attesting inter alia their province of origin; while the first inhabitants of the township arrived in exceptional circumstance, all future residents will have passed through the beneficiary selection process and be able to certify that they were selected.

The outcome of this project of exogenously-driven state expansion and transformation is highly uncertain. ‘State-building’ is underpinned by a specific vision of the relationship between people, territories and the state, and of what state functioning and functions should be. The model promoted is based on the Western
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The process of state formation, a process that resulted in representative democracies and state apparatus with control of the use of force, which provide services through a capillary presence on the ground and have a direct political and administrative relationship with all citizens. Yet this model is not necessarily consistent with Afghanistan’s institutional history, state formation and politics.

Decades of conflict have caused the collapse of the Afghan state, but the state as a form of political organisation is not new to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the mechanisms regulating political legitimacy in the Afghan context were different to those seen in western representative democracies and nation-states. In Afghanistan, the legitimacy of the state often resulted from continued negotiation with other political actors and projects of rule (such as tribes, religious networks, commanders, and so on), and its concrete mode of operation required articulation with these institutions (Roy, 1985; Barfield, 2010). Thus often nationality is not the most crucial criterion to access resources as well as political and social participation.

The different way of functioning and exerting authority of the Afghan state is often not acknowledged by international actors and it is often only read through the prism of corruption and incapacity of the state administration. The paradox of this technocratic exercise in ‘state building’ is that, in order to become responsible to its citizens, the state is instead made accountable to other states and international bodies. Attributing the flaws of the Land Allocation Scheme solely to the incapacity and mismanagement of the Ministry of Refugees is a way of depoliticizing and concealing the power relations at work which make these settlements the only legitimate places in the world where landless returnees can live.

Incorporated yet subaltern citizens, national yet uncertain livelihoods

The ambivalent relationship between the UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry adds much to the uncertainty surrounding the future of the land allocation sites and of their inhabitants. Turton highlights that the expansion of the Ethiopian state and the incorporation of the Mursi people into its jurisdiction resulted in their localization and marginalization, in that their movement was made difficult and they became dependent on values, norms and technologies lying beyond their means of production and control (Turton, 2005). The placement of the first returnee families in Beni Warsak entails an analogous condition of marginality (within the Afghan jurisdiction as well as within the interstate system) and of heightened dependency on state and international institutions.

These families unite the Afghan jurisdiction as well as the interstate world order holding a subaltern position, as dwellers of a disadvantaged place. This remote and unproductive area is the only territorialised location where their settlement is legitimate according to the interstate system. Their being landless affects the disadvantaged way they are to become dwellers of Afghanistan. In addition, their
nationality appears as a key factor in how they become dwellers of the world. Their condition, in fact, appears linked to the marginal and weak position of their country of nationality within the interstate system, as well as to the instability that predominates in its jurisdiction.

The consequences of the Land Allocation Scheme for people may vary considerably according to the alternative resources for livelihoods and protection at their disposal and allowing them to reduce their dependence on state and interstate interventions and control. Among such alternative resources are those derived according to a person’s status within other political systems (such as tribes, ethnic or religious communities, commanders’ protection); their migration skills; or their skill in dealing with the state and international organisations in order to attract resources or influence the implementation of the programme to their benefit. Not all of the official residents of the land allocation settlements appear to be affected in the same way by the project, as shown by the numerous shelters left unoccupied (reportedly due to land speculation) and by certain large houses, with two floors and all of the comforts, seen in the older sites.

For those returnees with the least alternative resources available, becoming the recipients of state and interstate interventions may open opportunities, but this also entails various risks. One such risk is becoming heavily dependent on (in this case, adventurous) projects run by state and interstate institutions; another is risk of further undermining or alienating alternative resources for livelihoods and protection.

The families first relocated to Beni Warsak can be taken as an example of destitute people for whom the scheme meant extreme uncertainty. This is a fragmented group, constituted by disparate families without strong leadership. None of the individuals concerned speak English, nor are they familiar with how to deal with state and international institutions. [They were living in Kabul in the shadow of the state – with what levels of distress is unknown, although they did manage to survive. They have now been brought under the wing of state and international organisations, but with scarce means protect themselves from the possible harmful effects of the Land Allocation Scheme.]

The returnees who have been settled in Beni Warsak have become highly dependent on the (scarce) resources of the state and international organisations, as well as on the relationship between the two (given the fate of the land allocation sites rests upon that relationship), which remains entirely outside their control. The spatial distribution of their shelters is the result of bureaucratic criteria, rather than relating to ethnic, family or other ties. Moreover, jobs and productive activities being unavailable on the site, it can be argued that migration has been made more necessary, yet at the same time more difficult and costly. Risks associated with attempting to settle elsewhere also exist – this is now the only place where they can access state and international assistance as returnees, and leaving may mean that they lose the parcel of land and the shelter they now own outright.
The enforcement of the national order

Several scholars have pointed out that the national order does not account for the ways in which many people experience membership and identity. Here, instead, we have seen the enforcement of the national order as a result of institutional action. We situated these representations within interstate relations, and saw how they inform the conceptual apparatus of the UNHCR. The agency endeavours to influence the bond between states and refugees (people who, within the national order, are displaced), with a view to incorporating them within state jurisdictions – either as nationals or as nonnationals whose presence has been formally legitimated. Since the refugee ‘problem’ is embedded within the national order, the search for solutions contributes to sustaining and reproducing that same order. Although certainly not the only rationale at work, this can impact greatly on livelihoods and settlement patterns, and can foster political transformations. Indeed, this rationale works as a ‘powerful context-generative social formation’ (Turton, 2005:268). In particular, we have seen that it is very relevant to an understanding of the creation (and the destruction) of hundreds of settlements across the globe – such as refugee camps and the would-be villages examined in this paper – as well as the ways in which they are transformed into a ‘place’ for their dwellers. We have also seen that in Afghanistan this rationale has resulted in the UNHCR joining an externally-driven expansion and transformation of the Afghan state.

The Land Allocation Scheme is striking for its adventurous nature, as it requires colossal engineering, involving a fight against nature and the transformation of a political system. This has produced a situation of extreme uncertainty for the would-be inhabitants of these would-be villages. The ‘unnaturalness’ of these settlements as spaces for human beings to permanently inhabit strongly challenges the representations of the relations between people, space and states implied by the national order and reveals the contradictions inherent in this project which strives to incorporate landless Afghan returnees into Afghanistan’s territorial jurisdiction at all costs.

The assumptions entailed by the normative representations underpinning the interstate system – nation states, welfare states, representative democracies – do not fit the Afghan reality. In that country, historical processes have resulted in different mechanisms of political legitimacy, criteria for membership and a different relationship between territories, people and the state. Enforcing a different model risks political destabilization and may undermine crucial livelihood and survival strategies based on non-state resources, such as transnational practices which take place in the shadow of the state.

The ‘space impasse’ which confronted the UNHCR led the agency to embark on this adventurous Land Allocation Scheme, perceived as extreme but as the only possible way of ‘absorbing’ landless returnees into Afghanistan and ensuring that they have a place in a world of states. This impasse, determined as it is by
international politics and the political economy of land in Afghanistan, reveals the extent to which the place-making project of the UNHCR in Afghanistan is shaped by power relations. These are often concealed by the technical way in which ‘reintegration’ and ‘state-building’ are presented, as well as by the rhetoric permeating the discourses about repatriation. As demonstrated above, the enforcement of the national order in Afghanistan ultimately participates in maintaining the Afghan state and Afghan refugees in a subaltern position within the interstate system. That system implies a world in which Afghan migration constitutes an illegitimate deviance and the Afghan state’s weakness and incapacity to govern justifies external interventions.

The highly uncertain future of the Land Allocation Scheme sites and of their dwellers ultimately calls into question the suitability of the interstate system, shaped as it is by interstate power relations, to constitute a viable or fair context for the adequate livelihood of the entire world’s population. This applies in particular to those portions of the world’s population who are nationals of the most marginal and disadvantaged states. In addition, it questions the role of a UN agency like the UNHCR, mandated by and embedded within the same interstate system. How might the values the UN claims to follow – such as equality between human beings as members of humanity living in a shared world – actually be enforced within the framework of the interstate system? To what extent is an agency like the UNHCR able to challenge global power relations, beyond attempts to merely soften their negative consequences for people and their livelihoods?

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