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Politicized Humanitarian Architecture in Al-Hol Camp: Urban Density, Spatial Segregation, and Carceral Design in a Refugee Settlement

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ABSTRACT

Al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria represents an exceptional case in the architecture of refugee settlements. Established in the 1990s, it dramatically expanded since 2016. Today, it hosts more than 60 nationalities, into a dense urban-like settlement while remaining tightly controlled through fences, checkpoints, and surveillance. Its governance and spatial organization distinguish it from conventional camps, showing how humanitarian aid and systems of control have become deeply intertwined in its physical design and daily operations.

The camp's population diversity Syrians, Iraqis, and foreign nationals has produced deliberate spatial segregation, with separate sectors enforcing a fragmented socio-spatial order. This design prioritizes containment and security over integration or self-reliance, reinforcing dependency on humanitarian aid and limiting opportunities for sustainable development. This paper examines Al-Hol through three interrelated dimensions: (1) its historical development and spatial expansion; (2) its dual character as both an urban settlement and a carceral design; and (3) its function as a politicized humanitarian infrastructure shaped by regional and international agendas. The study draws on camp layouts, drone footage, and demographic data. It argues that Al-Hol exemplifies "politicized humanitarian architecture." Here, planning decisions transform the camp into a controlled environment. This blurs the boundaries between refugee camp, city, and prison.

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1. Introduction

Space is political and ideological. It is shaped and molded from historical and natural elements through a profoundly political process [1]. This applies whether in cities, rural settlements, or so-called exceptional spaces. Refugee camps must therefore be understood as deeply political spaces that could be framed as humanitarian responses to “moments of political failure” [2], as temporary solutions created during crises to manage the immediate needs of those fleeing conflict or persecution, rather than address their deeper structural causes. Drawing heavily on the older model of the military camp, their containment technologies designed to provide for and manage a specific population such as soldiers were appropriated for the mass control and care of people in concentration camps and refugee camps [3].

By taking the sociological definition of the city as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals, and building on the fact that while the city is the characteristic locus of urbanism, the urban mode of life is not confined to cities [4]. urban planners, anthropologists, and migration scholars have begun to extend the framework of studying camps beyond their “messy surfaces”, recognizing camps as complex urban environments and a continuous process of production, in which power, use, time, and meaning intersect [5]. Camps have been conceptualized as “complex urban entities” (Magdy), as “city-camps” [2], as forms of “urban housing” [6], or “accidental cities” [7], “Carceral junctions” [8], and contested spatial-cultural fields [9].

Yet Al-Hol camp located in northeastern Syria, emerging from three major political crises (Gulf War, Iraq War, and the ISIS conflict) defies these conventional categories. Its spatial logic, diverse population, and systems of governance place it in an ambiguous space between humanitarian camp, urban settlement, and open-air prison.

As Magdy argues, Agamben’s theories about refugee camps as “states of exception” [2] at the threshold between juridical and political paradigms of sovereignty fail to explain how camp spatiality materially develops. Yet Turner and Whyte’s “carceral junctions” critique both this reification of confinement and overly celebratory conceptualizations of migrant agency and mobility [8]. Hanafi and Long describe refugee life in the camp as “unregulated, urban, and prison-like conditions” [2]. Similarly, Moran, Turner, and Schliehe studying the ‘carceral turn’ in carceral geography reveal that imprisonment and control are no longer confined to traditional prisons. Instead, surveillance and confinement now extend into many everyday spaces where vulnerable populations live, including refugee camps, detention facilities, and asylum centers [10].

Accordingly, this paper extends Mary Bosworth question: What it is about prison that makes it prison? [2] Conversely, what about the camp that makes it an urban settlement? To answer these questions, this research examines Al-Hol from two perspectives: a refugee-centered, bottom-up lens, and a politically driven, top-down one, and argues that Al-Hol is a dual spatial condition. It is at the same time a camp-city and a camp-prison. These form what can be called a “politicized humanitarian architecture”: a supposedly temporary space transformed by design and governance into a permanent mechanism of containment. So this research challenges the conventional binaries that separate “humanitarian” from “carceral” space.

2. Methodology

This research employs three complementary methods, to understand Al-Hol as: a complex spatial, humanitarian, and carceral environment. combining document analysis, spatial analysis, and visual ethnography at a distance. Relying on remote sources and secondary data, because conducting field-based research is not feasible under current conditions.

Document analysis of humanitarian datasets, operational assessments, and demographic briefs produced by REACH Initiative, OCHA, UNHCR, and international NGOs. Addressing historical development, demographic information, governance structures, security, and service provision.

Spatial analysis using Google Earth Pro time-series satellite imagery (2016-2024), to map the camp’s spatial growth, and traces its changing footprint over time.

And a visual ethnography at a distance, through drone-captured video material by “ISIS Prisons Museum” project, which offers rare views of spatial order and urban fabric. When combined with satellite imagery, these visual sources identify of Al-Hol 's urban-carceral duality, and politicized infrastructure.

3. Case Study: Al-Hol Camp: Historical, Political and Spatial Context

3.1. Historical and Political Context

Al-Hol camp, located approximately 40 kilometers east of Al Hasakah near the Syrian-Iraqi border, close to the village of Al-Hol, as shown in Fig. (1), within a semi-arid desert plain, exposed to harsh continental desert conditions, with very hot summers, cold winters, frequent dust storms, and limited natural vegetation or shading.

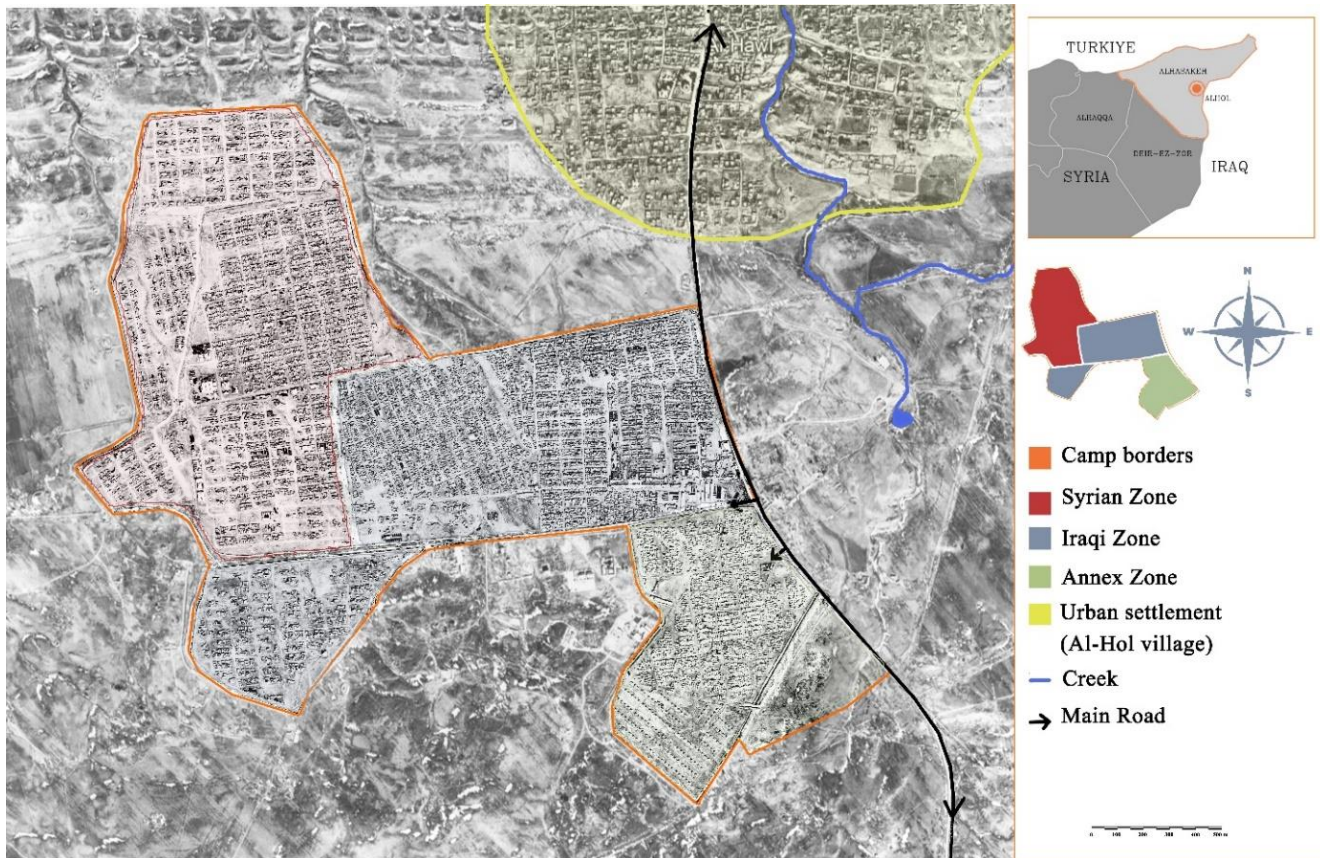


Figure 1: Al-Hol location.

The camp was originally established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) during the 1991 Gulf war, initially providing shelter for about 15,000 Iraqis, and was expanded during the US invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s [11].

In April 2016 Al-Hol reopened as a refugee camp by The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), to accommodate Iraqi refugees who crossed the border into northeastern Syria, fleeing intense fighting between Iraqi forces, international coalition airstrikes, and ISIS in northern and western Iraq [12]. By 2018, the camp held roughly 11,000 people.

Then, following the US-led Global Coalition against ISIS's defeat at Al-Baghoudz in 2019, the camp's population exploded as tens of thousands fled ISIS-held territory or surrendered to the SDF. Most men and older boys were transferred to separate detention facilities, while women and younger children including ISIS family members, civilians from conflict zones, and victims of ISIS violence were directed to Al-Hol and Roj camps, as there was no effort to screen people leaving IS territory before directing everyone into the detention system [13].

As of March 31, 2019, Al-Hol held about 73 thousand people from 60 different nationalities, including Syrian internally displaced persons, Iraqis, and many foreign nationals, some 65% are children under the age of 18, and 27% are women [14].

Today, Humanitarian actors including multiple UN agencies and international and local NGOs oversee sectoral service delivery, from health care and WASH to food distribution and child protection. A single implementing organization, Blumont, functions as the formal “Camp Manager”, coordinating core operations [15].

On the security side, the camp falls under the authority of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) the military branch of AANES responsible for enforcing security rules, controlling who enters and exits, and managing internal order [11].

3.2. Camp Evolution and Urban Morphology

Drawing on REACH assessments and annual camp profiles [16], the spatial development of Al-Hol reflects successive waves of displacement, as mapped in Fig. (2), which traces the camp's spatial growth over time. Built onto the footprint of the 1991 UNHCR camp, the site's contemporary layout began to take shape after its reopening in 2016; by 2017, approximately 20,000 people were accommodated in 4,000 shelters, forming the camp's initial core, which continued to grow over the following years in both residents and shelters, as reflected in the statistical graphs in Fig. (3).

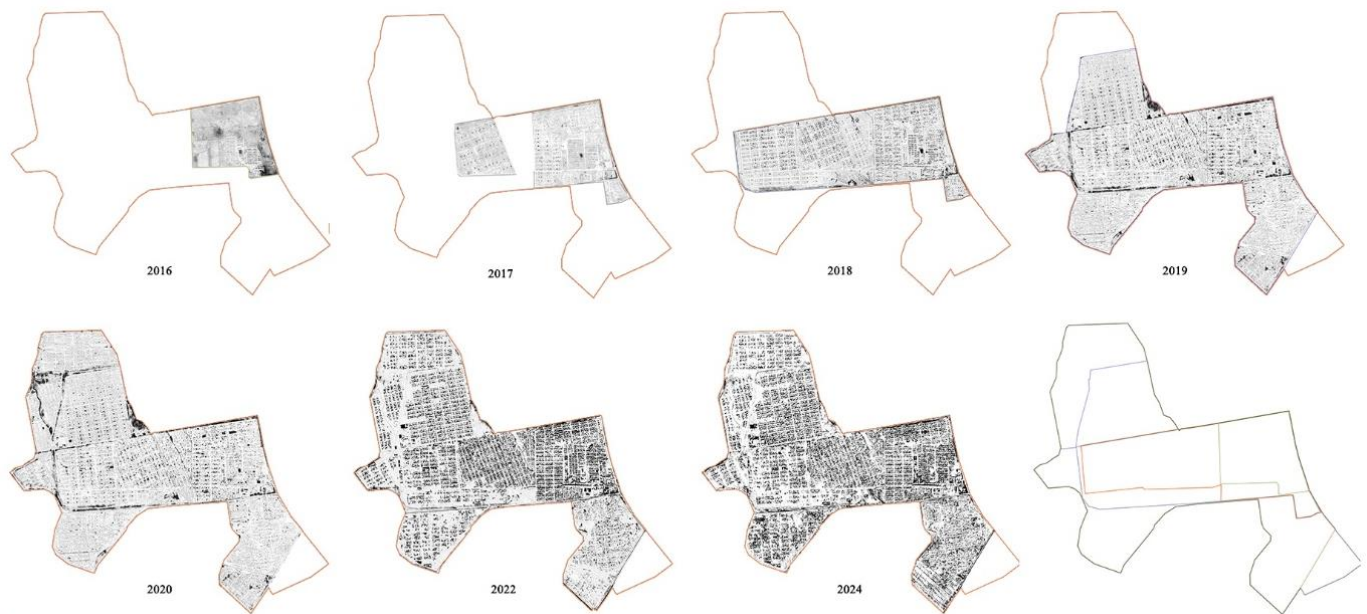


Figure 2: The camp spatial growth.

Between 2016 and 2018, the camp expanded methodically: Phases 1, 2, and 3 established the central residential area, while Phases 4 and 5 were added in anticipation of further influxes.

During this period, the camp's footprint increased to nearly 1.6 1.8 km², as planners laid down infrastructure ahead of actual demographic demand.

A dramatic rupture occurred in early 2019. Following the fall of Al-Baghuz, the camp's population increased by roughly 680% between December 2018 and March 2019, jumping to 73,520 people living in 12,903 shelters over 2.41 km² a peak density of more than ~30,500 persons per km², surpassing Manhattan (~28,000) and exceeding New York City (~11,000) three-fold. Entire phases that had been empty were populated almost overnight, and Phases 6, 7, 8 and the new Annex were rapidly activated to accommodate incoming foreign nationals.

Between 2020 and 2024, the camp's outer boundaries stabilized, but conditions inside became more densely packed as illustrated in Fig. (3), which maps the overall layout of Al-Hol. By 2021, Al-Hol hosted 57,657 residents in 14,427 shelters. By April 2024, the population had declined to approximately 42,000 people occupying 13,710 shelters spread across as lightly expanded 3.36 square kilometer area footprint.

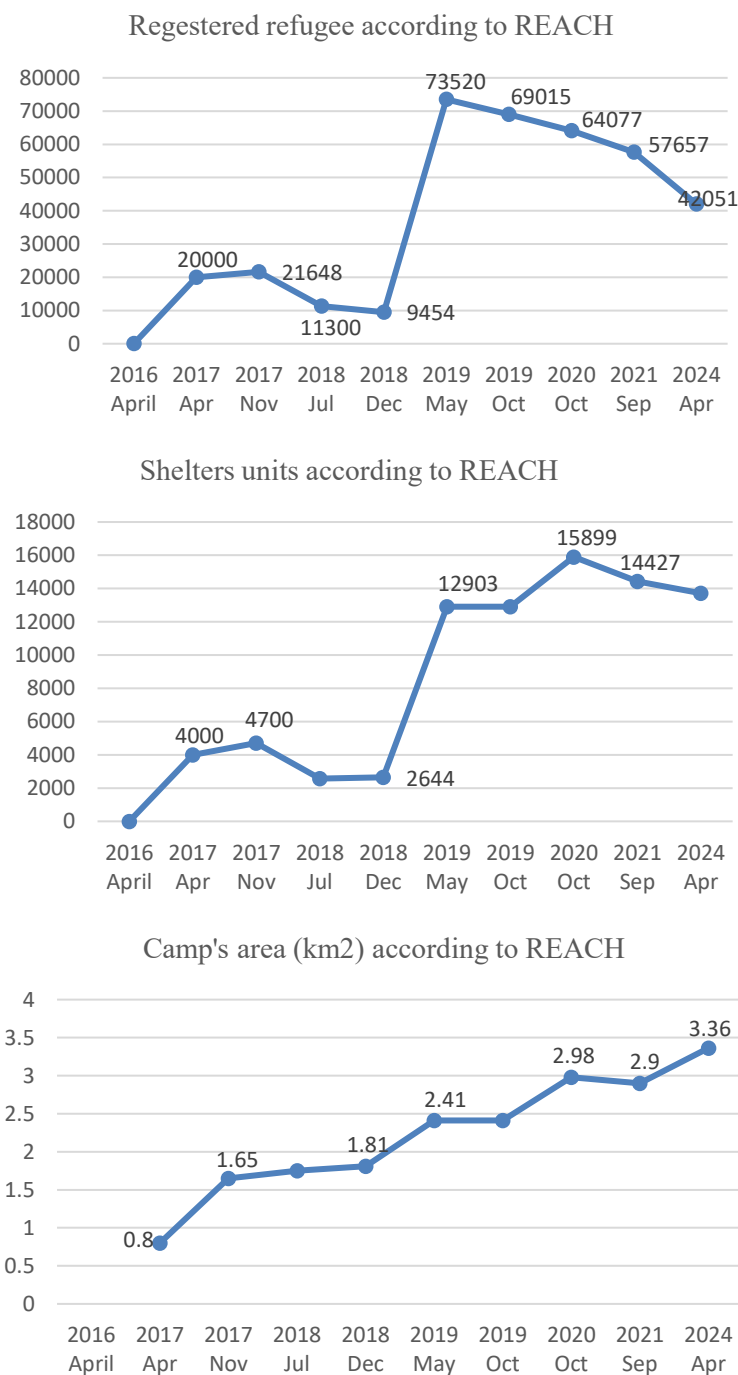


Figure. 3: Statistical analysis of population size, number of shelters, and camp area between 2016 and 2024.

Al-Hol is structured as a highly segmented landscape, divided into eight Phases and a separate Annex, further organized into five service zones across Phases 1–8 and six service zones within the Annex, as illustrated in Fig. (4), reflecting the administrative and operational division used by humanitarian organizations.

this structure also shaped demographic segregation, with 46% Iraqis, 39% Syrians, and 15% foreign nationals in January 2020, the latter isolated in the Annex [17].

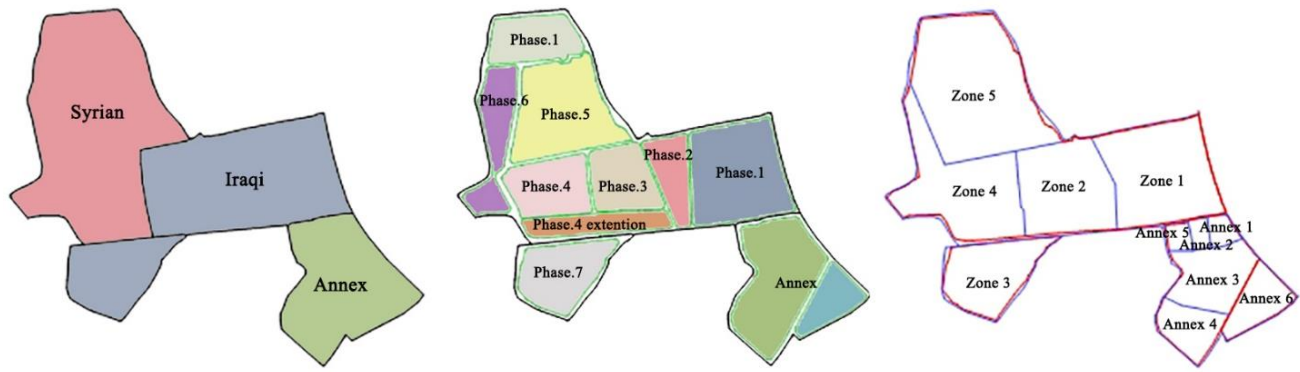


Figure 4: Camp segmentation into phases and service zone.

3.3. Al-Hol as Urban Settlement

From a refugee-centered, bottom-up perspective, a different picture emerges. Rather than a static humanitarian facility, based on universal standards of “shelter” and its repetition in a rigid grid of plots, Al-Hol reveals itself as a lived urban environment that has been reshaped by its residents, as shown in Fig. (5). Refugees have become active producers of space, creating “messy self-made structures” that respond to their preferences and needs and as Alqub and Matar show construct the camp both spatially and temporally through everyday home-making practices that imbue it with meaning and attachment [18].



Figure 5: Land use map of Al-Hol camp.

Across Al-Hol, refugees re-organized the 3×4 m UNHCR tent into multiple different urban compositions, by adding extensions, creating shading structures, building improvised courtyards, and carving out semi-private pathways. These practices give rise to four "*most legible*" urban fabrics, each reflecting specific histories of arrival, governance conditions, and patterns of social adaptation.

3.3.1. The First Urban Fabric: Phase 1 (1991 Footprint)

As shown in Fig. (6), the oldest sections of Al-Hol, built on top of the original 1991 UNHCR camp footprint, display a hybrid urban fabric in which standardized 3 × 4 m tent units intertwine with earlier mud-brick (adobe) shelters. Over nearly a decade of continuous occupation since 2016, emergency materials and improvised additions have gradually solidified into more durable forms, so that what began as temporary shelter now resembles a small rural settlement, with semi-permanent paths, micro-courtyards, and accreted extensions around the original units.



Figure 6: Satellite and drone images showing the transformation of spatial order and the formation of different residential clusters.

3.3.2. The Second Urban Fabric: Phases 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8

Across the main Syrian and Iraqi residential areas, the standardized 3×4 m tents are arranged in semi-structured formations, as shown in Fig. (7). Over time, residents have reorganized these units through everyday spatial practices, small adaptations and adjustments made in daily life that gradually loosen the original humanitarian grid and transform rigid rows into semi-ordered micro-clusters. In line with Lefebvre's understanding of spatial practice as the everyday production of lived space [19]. In many cases, tent locations have shifted to form tightly linked groups of two or three units around a shared courtyard-like space, suggesting that each small cluster often corresponds to an extended family or close relatives. The result is neither strictly regimented nor chaotic, but rather a flexible morphology that reflects residents' agency in shaping their environment.



Figure 7: Satellite and drone images showing the transformation of spatial order and the formation of different residential clusters.

3.3.3. The Third Urban Fabric: Annex zones 1, 2, 3, and 5

The third distinct urban form appears in the original Annex sections designated for foreign nationals, where the same standardized 3×4 m tent unit is compressed into hyper-dense, irregular, and highly fragmented configurations. Unlike the semi-orderly micro-clusters of the Syrian and Iraqi sectors, this fabric is markedly more chaotic and disorganized, with individual clusters tightly packed together and difficult to visually distinguish from one another. In these Annex zones, thousands of residents from around 60 different nationalities are crowded into a restricted area under a stricter security regime, so that extreme density, linguistic and cultural fragmentation, and permanent surveillance combine to produce an atmosphere of tension, uncertainty, and fear that is directly inscribed in the built fabric, as shown in Fig. (8).



Figure 8: Satellite images shows the transforming of the spatial order and drone images of different clusters forms.

3.3.4. The Fourth Urban Fabric: Annex zones 4 and 6 + Phase 7

The fourth urban fabric appears in the most recently constructed sections of the Annex, and in Zone 3 covering Phase 7, where humanitarian planners introduced a different organizational logic. Here, additional service units and small communal facilities were first installed as fixed anchors, and residents subsequently arranged their 3 × 4 m tents around these nodes, producing compact, nucleated clusters with a clearer internal structure. This configuration brings the Annex's spatial order closer to the semi-structured patterns found in the Syrian and Iraqi sectors, while still remaining distinct, and is noticeably less compressed and less congested than the hyper-dense, chaotic formations of the older Annex zones, as shown in Fig. (9).



Figure 9: Satellite and drone images showing the transformation of spatial order and the formation of different residential clusters.

3.4. Material and Temporal Closure in Camp Urbanization

Despite visible adjustments and ongoing transformations in Al-Hol's socio-spatial dynamics, camp urbanization remains confined within a materially closed framework that relies almost entirely on humanitarian aid. With civil rights such as employment and mobility remaining restricted, residents are unable to achieve self-reliance and thus remain structurally dependent on aid provisions [20]. Time, here, appears suspended at the level of survival, defined by the camp's constrained temporality, its enduring liminality, and the specific time-space through which it acquires meaning [21]. Within these limits, shelters are continually reconfigured using additional UNHCR rain covers, remnants of tent fabrics, and discarded materials, producing incremental yet fragile spatial adaptations.

This combined material and temporal closure helps explain why, after nearly a decade, Al-Hol's urban patterns continue to resemble Zaatari's pre-2015 phase, when tents still constituted the basic shelter unit typology, prior to their later replacement with caravans [22]. While spatial transformations in both camps responded to comparable needs such as privacy, climate adaptation, and family clustering their longer-term trajectories diverged due to fundamental differences in mobility regimes and access to resources. Further individual-shelter and socio-spatial studies may offer deeper insight into these divergent urban pathways.

3.5. Al-Hol as a Space of Confinement

"Carceral spatiality, however manifest, seems characterized by a technology of confinement; (intentionally) keeping-in, (detrimentally) containing, those 'within'. Where it purposively keeps people and things out" [10].

In Al-Hol, this logic is clearly embedded in the everyday life of residents. Through this lens, the design of carceral space plays a significant role in understanding how the aims of a carceral system are translated into lived experiences of confinement [23].

3.5.1. Restriction and Immobilization

The most visible manifestation of confinement at Al-Hol is severe restriction on movement. Data collected by humanitarian organizations over time documents a tightening of these restrictions: In December 2018, residents still had limited freedom to move. By May 2019, only 23% of households that needed medical exits were permitted to leave the camp. This percentage dropped to 4% by October 2019. By October 2020, residents reported being able to exit only for genuine medical emergencies. By September 2021, key informants indicated that no residents were able to leave at all, except in rare emergency cases requiring an approval. As “Between Two Fires” notes, the exist way out that continued to occur were through informal mediation, tribal negotiations, or local agreements, and in the case of Iraqi refugees, through government-to-government coordination with the Iraqi state [11].

This immobilization is particularly severe in the Annex section. There, movement is almost entirely forbidden. Residents cannot own phones, are subject to intense surveillance, routine searches are conducted, and any access to services requires being escorted by authorities.

The governance system at Al-Hol a hybrid arrangement of humanitarian organizations, security forces, and political authorities works together to produce what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “bare life” [24], a population that is immobilized, controlled, and stripped of political agency and rights. As a recent human rights analysis on Al-Hol notes, “women described the devastation of not being able to tell their children if their imprisonment would ever end” [13], highlighting the profound temporal uncertainty that defines everyday life in the camp.

Suspicion defines this humanitarian encampment, emerging from refugees’ uncertainties over identity, status, and hospitality; exclusion thus manifests viscerally through affectual intensities that transcend physical containment [25]. The harm extends beyond the camp's physical boundaries. Reports show that even people who manage to leave or are released often face severe stigma, suspicion, and social exclusion upon return to their home communities regardless of whether they had any connection to ISIS.

3.5.2. Physical Infrastructure of Control

The physical infrastructure of Al-Hol embodies both material and symbolic technologies of confinement. As Mackinnon and White argue, “the location and particularly the nature of the site chosen for adaptation tell us a great deal about where it lies on the spectrum from care to control” [26]. Al-Hol’s location along the Iraqi border clearly prioritizes containment over integration, placing the camp firmly at the control end of this spectrum.

This logic extends inward through layers of physical borders: the camp’s external double-layered fences with earth berms, controlled gateways, and processing centers form a second layer of border, while additional internal fences separating the three major population sectors by nationality serve as a third layer. Building on Bayyari’s argument that “borders are not international only; they appear inside cities, shaping how people move, live, and connect through gated communities, police checkpoints, surveillance cameras, zoning laws, crossing lines, and pavements all acts of bordering” [27].

Watchtowers are engineered to maximize visibility of residents while minimizing their agency. The continuous presence of this controlling infrastructure in daily life constitutes a form of systematic violence a constant message to residents that they are being watched and confined [28].

4. Results

4.1. Al-Hol as a "Walled Village" (camp-city / camp-prison)

Analysis of Al-Hol from both bottom-up (refugee-centred) and top-down (political-security) perspectives reveals a dual spatial and social reality, in which camp-city and camp-prison coexist, creating a hybrid environment that

resists conventional categorization. While formal planning imposed a grid of standardized 3×4 m UNHCR tents, the camp's morphology today reflects layered processes of adaptation, negotiation, and socio-spatial resistance, echoing Dallal's shift "from shelters to dwellings" [22].

Its dense built environment and resident-constructed shelters give it the external appearance of a functioning urban settlement and suggest the practice of "*refugee architecture*": a form of spatial production shaped by displacement, cultural memory, and the socio-spatial agency of its residents [2].

Yet these urban forms exist within, and are constrained by, an infrastructure explicitly designed for control, where physical structures work together to create a terrain of restriction that pervades the camp's urban landscape, discouraging the spatial agency of displaced people and suppressing the reworking of their political subjectivities [3]. The camp embodies the three key conditions identified in carceral geography detriment, intention, and spatiality creating what must be understood as a complex architecture of control. Al-Hol ultimately functions less as a refugee camp and more as a "*walled village*": a territorially bounded, heavily surveilled, and politically isolated settlement where urban life and carceral logic have become inseparable.

5. Discussion

5.1. Cultural Memory and Refugee Architecture

These results suggest more than spatial adaptation; they point to deeper processes of cultural memory and identity formation. Here, the relationship between people's identities and the image of space becomes central [29], raising critical questions about whether observed spatial differences reflect patterns of cultural reassembly. As Lucy Gregson argues in her study of Zaatari, a "sense of place" is reassembled not through the reproduction of identical forms, but through new spatial expressions shaped by cultural memory under altered material conditions [30]. In a similar way, AlWaer, Sibley, and Cooper's work on the design and use of space in refugee camps shows how everyday spatial practices in Zaatari often draw on previous traditional habits and domestic routines, producing a kind of cultural continuity and a more vernacular use of space, that sustains a more familiar way of living in exile [31].

Does this apply to Al-Hol? To what extent do the different urban fabrics materialize cultural, social, and residential patterns from residents' places of origin? Or does the stark divergence between these fabrics reflect the different levels of restriction and control across camp sections?

The analysis underscores the need for empirical studies of the camp's internal social geographies, examining how residents create community and meaning within spaces of confinement, maintain a "sense of place" despite severe restrictions, and the long-term implications of governing populations through humanitarian detention.

5.2. Politicized Humanitarian Architecture

What distinguishes Al-Hol from conventional carceral institutions such as prisons and detention centers is a troubling reality: its detention regime operates through humanitarian infrastructure itself. Amnesty International has described this arrangement as "mass arbitrary detention under humanitarian cover" [32], in which the camp functions as a space of containment and exclusion, managing "undesirable" populations while intertwining aid with mechanisms of control [33].

Despite this, Al-Hol retains its designation as a "camp," even though the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, has declared: "The nomenclature of 'camp' (and even more so of an IDP/refugee camp) is entirely inappropriate to describe what is in fact an open prison for those arbitrarily and indefinitely detained en masse absent any judicial process or review" [34]. Moreover, since 2019, Al-Hol no longer meets UNHCR's definition of a refugee camp "in which refugees or internally displaced persons reside and receive protection" [35]. This situation exemplifies how "protection" becomes a mechanism to protect society from refugees rather than to protect refugees themselves, producing what Katz describes drawing on Derrida's concept of hospitality as "visually identified spectacles of both hospitality and hostility" [3].

This condition places Al-Hol at the extreme end of Agamben's "state of exception," where the law is not absent but "inscribed in the body of the law itself" [24], producing a legalized suspension of rights. Al-Hol's arrangement represents a troubling expression of politicized humanitarian architecture, an exception within an exception, representing an emergency condition embedded within the wider crisis of Syrian displacement, where temporariness has become permanent, humanitarianism has become carceral, and the camp has become, in substance if not in official name, a prison.

6. Conclusion

This study examined Al-Hol as a paradigmatic case of politicized humanitarian architecture. By tracing the camp's spatial growth, sectoral organization, and changing morphology to reveal how humanitarian governance is materially embedded in the built environment. Camp infrastructure shelters, sectors, and administrative divisions actively produce the spatial conditions through which everyday life is regulated and controlled.

The research makes two key contributions to debates in humanitarianism, carceral geography, and urban studies of refugee camps. First, it proposes "politicized humanitarian architecture" as an analytical lens that captures Al-Hol's dual spatial condition as a hybridized infrastructure, where aid mechanisms enable containment.

Second, the "walled village" concept offers a novel descriptor positioned between "accidental cities" and open-air prisons, highlighting how carceral forms are ruralized and vernacularized beyond classical prison models.

These findings on density, spatial segregation, and layered control infrastructures raises fundamental questions about the ethics and politics of humanitarian governance. What is the actual function of humanitarian intervention? How can spaces designed for aid become instruments of control? what does "protection" truly mean when aid infrastructure doubles as confinement? These urgent questions of human rights and justice demand critical re-examination by humanitarian organizations, governments, policymakers, practitioners, and global publics.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in financial or political aspects.

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All drone footage used in this paper is derived from original, unpublished video recordings owned by the "ISIS Prisons Museum." These materials were used with permission and are not publicly available.

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