

Caring control or controlling care? Double bind facilitated by biometrics between UNHCR and Syrian refugees in Jordan

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ABSTRACT

Biometric technologies are increasingly used by governments and international organizations in the context of refugee protection and control. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the ‘double bind’ embedded in the collection and processing of biometric data by exploring the experiences of Syrian refugees residing in Jordan. While taking biometric data is part of the UNHCR-registration, it is also used for other purposes, such as providing assistance and tracking movement. The findings are based on desk research and empirical data collected in Jordan. While stakeholders with vested interests argue for the benefits of technology, critical research is more concerned with human rights, unintended consequences of humanitarian governance or surveillance humanitarianism. Refugees, upon registration, seem to be more concerned with smooth and uninterrupted access to aid. While due to their vulnerable position they cannot really afford considering the consequences of giving their biometric data when they are asked to do so, sharing their biometric data entails a double bind situation. On the one hand, international organizations (such as the UNHCR and the WFP) in cooperation with commercial actors use iris scans as a payment method promising better food security for Syrian refugees in Jordan. On the other hand, the very same biometric data can be used for controlling, if not blocking, their free movement. The double bind logic implies that refugees registered with their biometrics can enjoy care only if they tolerate sophisticated control too.

KEYWORDS

humanitarian aid, biometric technology, double bind, iris scans, Syrian refugees in Jordan

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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to public goods and services, such as food and shelter, is a right enshrined not only in major human rights instruments such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 25), but also in constitutions and basic laws. Fulfilment of human rights is not without challenges and even democratic states have varying capacities to meet their obligations. These capacities have been increasingly influenced, if not altered, by rapid technological development. With respect to the Global South, various information communication technologies (ICT), automation, digitalization and various humanitarian innovations may improve the lives of the chronically displaced poor by promising better access to information or services (Jacobsen 2015; Bock et al. 2020).

Identity (ID) cards and passports are issued upon collecting biometric data (iris scans, fingerprints, face recognition, etc) from citizens in members states of the European Union (EU) too. Access to public goods and welfare services, that is, the fulfilment of basic human rights, however, is rarely conditioned on processing biometric data. Even if such data is increasingly used to register and validate the identity of individuals in various contexts, the use of technologies processing such data is strictly regulated and limited to the fields of law enforcement and border control activities within the EU.¹

Law enforcement agencies, security and intelligence services, just as border control authorities, indeed, enjoy somewhat more freedom than other actors in terms of data collection and processing (Ryngaert – van Eijk 2019). As a result, the EU and its member states are increasingly testing and using artificial intelligence (AI) based technologies combined with biometric data in their efforts to strengthen border control and mitigate security risks related to cross-border terrorism and serious crime (Dumbrava 2021). For example, having been developed and tested in Hungary, Greece and Latvia, the iBorderCtrl project (2013–2019), aimed to capture human emotions and to detect deception in the context of border control in order to develop a decision support system for border checks (Dumbrava 2021: 17). Such systems could not be tested in other locations (public or private places) in any of the countries.

Asylum-seekers and migrants entering Hungary during the migration crisis in 2015 were registered by their biometric data (fingerprints) selectively as the Hungarian government was not interested in registering everyone crossing the country (Macskovics 2019; Toth 2020). Non-registration of their biometrics may also meet the interests of refugees (Hayes 2017: 185). Indeed, many of them did not even want to be registered in Hungary, preferring an asylum

¹Within the EU/EEA region it is not only the GDPR and sector-specific instruments which apply in the context of personal data protection, but two further instruments related to law-enforcement, *Regulation (EU) 2016/794 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation* and *Directive (EU) 2016/680 on Law Enforcement* were also enacted. They define the data protection guarantees regarding data transfer, control, and processing in the context of international cooperation (among authorities and agencies of EU members states). GDPR defines biometric data as sensitive, therefore their processing is forbidden except where there is a 'substantial public interest'. Beyond law enforcement and border control, biometric data is widely used in the health care sector, just as in the field of medical and life sciences. With regards to automated decision making, the proposed AI regulation (Proposal for a *Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council. Laying Down Harmonised Rules on Artificial Intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act) and Amending Certain Union Legislative Acts*. COM (2021) 206 final Brussels, 21 April, 2021) also applies a careful approach categorizing certain technologies, for example, remote facial recognition, as 'high risk' and prohibiting their application.



procedure in Western Europe (Hartocollis 2015). However, refugees would have been exposed to strict registration procedures based on their biometrics, had they been registered as refugees by the UNHCR in the Middle East.

The Global South, indeed, offers a far more fertile ground for testing and using various technologies wrapped as humanitarian experiments or innovations (Sandvik et al. 2017; Madianou 2019a; Madianou 2019b) especially in the context of refugee and migration management.² International donor organizations, such as the EU and the World Bank have invested billions of dollars in technology development with the stated objective of making the operation and services of UN organizations, such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or World Food Programme (WFP) more effective. Whether organizations using biometric technology have become more or less accountable is a matter of perspective, but the critical protection literature claims that refugee protection is weakened by the extensive use of technologies (Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018). As a result, the UNHCR is increasingly portrayed as the ‘global police of populations’ (Scheel – Ratfisch 2014) fulfilling a controlling function within the broader logic of ‘humanitarian governance’ (Barnett 2013; Jacobsen – Fast 2019), even if their original mandate is limited to protection (Stevens 2016).

Considering the strict rules limiting the combined use of biometric data and AI within the EU, ordinary people’s perceptions and experiences with sharing their biometric data could be explored only outside its borders. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the literature by further exploring the dilemmas built in the use of biometrics (Farraj 2011; Lodinova 2016; Jacobsen 2017; Jacobsen – Fast 2019; Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018; Madianou 2019a, b; Molnar 2020; Holloway et al. 2021; Kloppenburg – van der Ploeg 2020) by using the term ‘double bind’ to describe the trap refugees fall in at the moment when they share their biometric data.

The term ‘double bind’, coined by the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson exploring the reasons for schizophrenia (1962), refers to situations when an individual, usually being in a vulnerable and dependent position, cannot escape punishment inflicted upon him by the actor he/she is dependent on. The double bind is manifested in two simultaneous messages (injunctions) addressed to the person being dependent on an authority: (injunction A) ‘[d]o not do so and so, or I will punish you’ and (injunction B) ‘[i]f you do not do so, I will punish you.’ A negative consequence (punishment) is always present regardless of the choice itself (Bateson 1972/2000: 206–208). As this paper will demonstrate in the context of UNHCR-refugee relations, the unescapable punishment works in the following way: it is required (for the sake of registration, in name of more efficient protection) that refugees share their biometric data, while non-registration entails denial of services (punishment A). Registration however implies control of movement and stay (punishment B).

We opted for implementing the research in a concrete geographical setting, focusing on Syrian refugees staying in Amman, and on a particular biometric technology, iris scans, used by international organizations (UNHCR, WFP) in cooperation with private actors (IrisGuard delivering the technology, financial service providers and supermarkets

²Refugee protection and migration management are related, but not identical concepts (phenomena), the difference not being detailed here due to word count limits. With respect to our focus, the UNHCR’s original mandate is limited to matters of asylum and refugee protection (care, for sake of simplicity). However, its practice and activities can also be interpreted as ‘population control’ for reasons discussed by Scheel and Ratfisch (2014).



accepting iris scans as payment methods). The research focused on the following questions: How do Syrian refugees receiving food aid (in the form of cash and voucher assistance, CVA) via UNHCR or WFP think about biometric technologies? And beyond the understandable purpose of registration, has access to food aid, that is, the fulfilment of a human right, become conditional on sharing biometric data? What price are refugees expected to pay for protection?

The paper unfolds by introducing the research methods in the next section. While the second section briefly summarizes the legal-regulatory environment in which refugees are hosted in Jordan, the third section introduces the technology (iris scans) used by UNHCR and WFP. The third and fourth sections provide an overview of the main arguments for (care) and against (control) the use of biometric technology, while refugees' perceptions are used to underpin or challenge the arguments. The 'for' and 'against' arguments are to be seen from the perspectives of refugees whose biometric data is used for various purposes.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

To reply to the research questions, desk research was combined with empirical data collection. We limited the research to the Jordanian context and looked for information provided on official websites in order to map how the office of the UNHCR, the WFP and the World Bank communicate the use of biometric data in the context of registration and providing services. Information obtained from the website of the main private actor developing the technology, Iris Guard, and reports produced by market analysts were also used to map the advantages. Arguments of the main stakeholders were contrasted with critical arguments known from the literature. To see if the arguments are shared by the refugees themselves, their experiences with and perceptions on technology were explored by empirical data collection in Jordan. Primary data were collected in Jordan in summer 2020 and summer 2021 by means of fieldwork.

2.1. Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the ethical board of Corvinus University of Budapest and conducted in line with the EU's relevant guidelines (EU 2020). Considering the refugees' particular vulnerability, we followed the EU-principles to mitigate potential risks of coercion and power imbalances between the researchers and the participants, the interviews were conducted by the Jordanian participant (PhD-student) of the research group. Oral consent has been taken from all respondents before commencing interviews by explaining to them the necessary information such as the name of the interviewee, name of the university, aim of the study, the duration of the interview, and the confidentiality of information, etc.

To protect participants' safety, all data that may be used to identify the participants were stored safely. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, translated and transcribed to English after the interviews. For ethical and security purposes, the interviews were not audio-recorded; the interviewer made detailed notes and quotes during each interview by hand. Following each interview, the hand-written notes were complemented with personal headnotes and memos (Creswell 2018: 301–312; Corbin – Strauss 2015).



2.2. Sampling and participants

With regards to sampling, there were approximately 750,000 UNHCR-registered refugees living in Jordan in spring 2021. More than two-thirds of the Syrian refugees arrived in 2013 or before; their vast majority lives in host communities outside camps (83%) and 85.5% of them are registered by their biometric data (iris scans) according to the [UNHCR \(2021\)](#).

For various reasons, our ambition was modest: to collect qualitative data, namely, authentic opinions and voices from refugees to illustrate the main arguments for and against the use of biometric technology. Therefore, altogether 44 interviews were conducted ($n = 10$ in 2020; $n = 34$ in 2021). Our respondents were approached in summer 2020 and 2021 in the capital, Amman, which hosts roughly a third of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan ([UNHCR 2021](#)). The majority of interviews was conducted in the Sweileh neighborhood (north of the city centre) and Abu Nusair District Directorate (North-Western Part of Amman) in 2020. Sweileh is a popular area for refugees not only because it is affordable, but it also offers convenient public transportation and services such as banks and markets. The district is also known for having absorbed waves of refugees and migrants over the years such as Jordanians of Chechen and Circassian origin. In 2021, the face-to-face interviews were conducted in Sweileh, Amman ($n = 20$), in Irbid ($n = 5$), Al-Salt ($n = 5$), Al-Karak ($n = 4$, online). The demographic profile of the participants can be found in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#). Participants were selected by the following criteria: to be a Syrian refugee registered by the UNHCR, to have spent at least 2 years in Jordan, to have stayed in a refugee camp in a given period of time upon arrival to Jordan, currently live in a host community in Jordan, to participate in and benefit from WFP or UNHCR aid programmes by using iris scans combined with CVA to access to food.

2.3. Observations and interviews

The two main sources of empirical data included daily observations and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees. Observations enabled the interviewee to observe their lives closely by visiting a grocery store in one of the poor neighbourhoods in Sweileh. While this grocery store did not use iris technology for payment transactions, the owner of the shop knew well both the refugees (as his customers) and the interviewee (as a friend). This created trust and allowed the interviewee to get to know refugees' lives, customs, financial and food security concerns, consumption patterns better.

The semi-structured discussions with Syrian refugees lasted about 30–60 min in both years. The researcher, one of the co-authors of this paper, visited the Sweileh area a couple of times having small talk with his friend at his supermarket before he initiated the interviews in 2020 and lived within the refugee community in summer 2021 for a period of two months. In most cases, the interviewee was accompanied by other Syrian refugees, but these are to be considered observations and not proper focus group interviews. If it was possible, a 'side talk' with most of the participants was also facilitated by the researcher so that he could build rapport and trust to gain more information for research.

The interviews took place in refugees' homes and the researcher took notes describing the living conditions on the one hand and to understand each participant's unique stories and personal experiences on the other hand. The semi-structured interviews consisted of the following general themes: demographic information; the general food security of the



given family (how many calories, whatever they take); personal perception of food security (of the respondent's family): are they content or feel undernourished, etc; experiences with using technology (biometric identification) when they access food (aid).

Interviews were complemented with field notes. The researcher recorded his observations on how refugees and international organizations (UNHCR, WFP) use and relate to technologies used in receiving/providing food aid. He visited a branch of Cairo Amman Bank in the Abu-Nusair area at the time of cash aid transfers for refugees which is often done at the end of each month to observe the functioning of the ATMs (with iris scan authentication) and how Syrians use it in both summers. Notes also contained information on the setting of interviews, time, place, and context, the mood of the interviewees, their reaction to his questions as mentioned above. If clarification was needed during data analysis, the native speaker co-author used Facebook for follow-up questions.

2.4. Data analysis

The first ten interview transcripts (2020) were coded manually and analysed following [Corbin and Strauss \(2015: 85–105\)](#). The second set of interviews conducted in 2021 were built on the results of the data analysis of the first round on the one hand and on the comments the manuscript received from anonymous reviewers. Interviews conducted in summer 2021 focused on refugees' experiences with and memories of the information provided by the UNHCR, consent, data sharing with third parties and constrained access to food aid provided by WFP by use of iris scans. As our sample was not representative of the entire refugee population and we did not aim at conducting proper ethnographic research describing the lives of refugees in the given community either, the data will be used to illustrate voices from the ground by embedding refugees' opinion in the next sections.

3. THE LEGAL-REGULATORY AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONTEXT

With the Syrian war going on for almost a decade, refugees continue to stay in neighbouring countries, Jordan included ([Beaujouan – Rasheed 2019](#)). Jordan, however, is not a signatory party to the Geneva convention, so the UNHCR's presence and services are regulated by a memorandum of understanding signed with Jordan (1998, amended in 2014) on the one hand, and by its own mandate, on the other hand. Syrian refugees are officially required to go to one of the UNHCR's refugee camps to register with both the UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior (MoI). Seen as an integral element of protection and right to identity ([Macskovich 2019: 35–38](#)) registration with the UNHCR is mandatory upon arrival, and not a matter of choice or consent ([Schoemaker et al. 2021; Molnar 2020; Holloway et al. 2021](#)).

The process of registration traditionally included the collection of basic personal data (name, date of birth, gender, and country of origin, as well as the details of any identity documents, if available). Syrian refugees, however, arrived in Jordan in an age when governments and international organizations could test and use not only pens, pencils or spreadsheets on PCs, but highly advanced technology too, which entailed the collection of their biometric data too. When the initial registration with the UNHCR was complete, the refugee used to receive a UNHCR



Table 1. Participant demographics (data collection: 2020); in-text codes: P1-10

Household size: number of family members (<i>n</i> = 10)	Gender	Marital status	Age range	Education level	Use of relevant technology	Date of UNHCR registration in Jordan
2-4 (2)	Male (2)	Married (2)	31-40 (1)	Illiterate (1)	Iris (2)	2011-2013 (2)
			51-60 (1)	Secondary (1)	Smartphone (2)	2014-2017 (0)
					ATMs (2)	
5-7 (3)	Male (2)	Married (3)	41-50 (3)	Illiterate (1)	Iris (3)	2011-2013 (2)
	Female (1)			Primary (2)	Smartphone (1)	2014-2017 (1)
					ATMs (3)	
8 or more (5)	Male (3)	Married (4)	31-40 (1)	Illiterate (1)	Iris (5)	2011-2013 (4)
	Female (2)	Widow (1)	41-50 (3)	Primary (3)	Smartphone (5)	2014-2017 (1)
			51-60 (1)	Secondary (1)	ATMs (5)	
					electronic voucher (1)	

Source: authors.





Table 2. Participant demographics (data collection: 2021); in-text codes: P11-44

Household size: number of family members (<i>n</i> = 34)	Gender	Marital status	Age range	Education level	Use of relevant technology	Date of UNHCR registration in Jordan
2-4 (5)	Male (3)	Married (4)	20-30 (2)	Illiterate (0)	Iris (3)	2011-2013 (4)
	Female (2)	Single (1)	31-40 (2)	Primary (0)	Smartphone (5)	2014-2017 (1)
		Divorced (0)	41-50 (1)	Secondary (2)	ATMs (5)	
		Widow (0)	51-60 (0)	Undergraduate (3)		
				Postgraduate (0)		
5-7 (17)	Male (5)	Married (8)	20-30 (8)	Illiterate (1)	Iris (12)	2011-2013 (7)
	Female (12)	Single (6)	31-40 (6)	Primary (3)	Smartphone (16)	2014-2017 (10)
		Divorced (2)	41-50 (2)	Secondary (2)	ATMs (11)	
		Widow (1)	51-60 (1)	Undergraduate (9)		
				Postgraduate (2)		

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Household size: number of family members ($n = 34$)	Gender	Marital status	Age range	Education level	Use of relevant technology	Date of UNHCR registration in Jordan
8 or more (12)	Male (5)	Married (8)	20-30 (4)	Illiterate (2)	Iris (9)	2011-2013 (9)
	Female (7)	Single (3)	31-40 (2)	Primary (5)	Smartphone (12)	2014-2017 (3)
		Divorced (1)	41-50 (4)	Secondary (4)	ATMs (10)	
		Widow (0)	51-60 (2)	Undergraduate (1)		
				Postgraduate (0)		

Source: authors.



‘proof of registration’ document, a copy of which was sent to Jordan’s MoI, ensuring that the refugee could obtain a MoI-card.³

Biometric technologies coupled with AI have been used in the context of migration management for various purposes since the early 2000s (Ajana 2013; Jacobsen 2017; Beduschi 2021). Gelb and Clark (2013) reviewed about 160 projects using various biometric technologies for the benefit of the local population in the Global South as early as 2013, and found that about half of them has been supported by donors. Driven by the regulatory modality of the market (Leenes et al. 2017), that is, in cooperation with tech companies, the EU and the UNHCR also invested in developing a very complex IT-system (PRIMES) to register refugees by recording their personal data and to provide services (COM 2005: 3; UNHCR 2013). PRIMES uses the refugees’ biometric data not only for purposes such as identity management (registration and regular ID verification; foundational ID), but also for providing services, for example, food aid in form of CVA (functional ID). These two objectives are distinct purposes of data collection and processing that requires considering consent as the proper legal basis (see section 4). However, as argued by Holloway et al. (2021: 30) ‘consent for registration (foundational ID) or services (functional ID) is likely to be taken as blanket consent for service provision via biometric data,’ at least this is how most refugees interpret the rationale behind taking their biometrics.

Our empirical data also illustrates that registration is impossible without providing biometric data, and non-registration equals to the denial of services, even if there should be a meaningful difference between foundational and functional ID (Schoemaker et al. 2021: 8; Holloway et al. 8: 13). Furthermore, it corresponds to findings of a parallel research: most refugees understand neither the duality of registration purposes (Schoemaker et al. 2021), nor the differences between biometric data (iris scans) taken for registration and those for CVA or food aid (Holloway et al. 2021). Hala (P9), a 27-year-old female respondent who studied journalism and media and arrived at Jordan with her family in 2012 compared registration to that of the Covid-vaccination:

Registration at UNHCR is like the Corona vaccine. It is true that taking the vaccine is not compulsory, and certainly the police will not come and take you from your home and force you to take the vaccine. But you have to take it. This is exactly what happened to us with regards to UNHCR. No one forced us to register our biometric data, but without registration there will be no health care, training course or food assistance.

Refugees without an asylum seeker certificate and an ID-card issued by the Jordanian Ministry of Interior (MoI) struggle to access public health care services or register their children in public schools. Their mobility within the Kingdom is restricted, just as access to aid. In practice, non-registration equals to the denial of services in most cases and could put a refugee in

³Holloway et al. (2021: 18) described the process slightly differently arguing that “[r]efugees from Syria are required to register for a security card with the Ministry of Interior (MoI) when they enter the country before registering with UNHCR if they need assistance – both registration processes include giving basic personal data and iris scans and result in receiving a biometric security card from the Ministry of Interior and a ‘proof of registration’ document or asylum seeker/refugee certificate from UNHCR.” According to our respondents they received a card upon registration (called ‘asylum or refugee card’). To have better control over every Syrian living in Jordan, the MoI, in cooperation with UNHCR, has re-registered Syrians residing outside the camps in Jordan since 2015; these cards must be renewed annually. As part of the annual renewal process, Syrians are expected to present additional documents, such as passports or proof of residence (rent contract signed by their landlord). This asylum card is needed not only in the context of humanitarian aid, but also for obtaining a driving licence or buying SIM cards.



a position of being forced to relocate to refugee camps or deported to Syria (Loh 2016: 53; Achilli 2015: 5; Staton 2017; Molnar 2020).

The collected personal data is recorded in the PRIMES system consisting of various modules. A detailed description can be found on the UNHCR's website (UNHCR 2021b), but ProGres_v4, BIMS, IrisGuard, and GDT can be mentioned as the most relevant components. ProGres_v4 is UNHCR's fourth generation registration and case management system that allows UNHCR to grant access to partners, including host governments, ensuring a common platform for collaboration (UNHCR 2021a). Connected to ProGres_v4 and being the main biometric identity management system, BIMS stores all ten fingerprints and two irises from each UNHCR-registered individual to build a globally available biometric record. It includes a centralized database allowing real-time consolidation and checking of identity across all UNHCR sites using the system. As argued by the UNHCR, the use of a multimodal system, rather than relying on fingerprints or irises alone, provides more complete and accurate coverage of populations (UNHCR 2021b).

IrisGuard (denoting both a tech solution and the company developing it) is a similar primary biometric tool, collecting two iris scans and a facial photo from each individual. However, it is used for a different purpose. IrisGuard enables humanitarian partners and financial service providers (MasterCard, Visa) to validate identity and qualification for assistance via their irises (see next section). In cooperation with the WFP, iris-enabled point-of-sale devices were first introduced in camp supermarkets to ensure access to food assistance without requiring vouchers, cards or PINs. Later it was expanded to provide cash interventions to the refugee community directly through the Cairo Amman Bank's ATM network around 2015. IrisGuard as a company, banks or financial service providers do not have access to refugees' personal and biometric records (in principle) (UNHCR 2021a).

The last relevant component, GDT (Global Distribution Tool), launched as a companion tool to BIMS in 2015, enables the distribution of in-kind assistance by digitizing the entire food distribution process. It accepts food distribution lists from various actors and provides real-time reporting on exactly which refugee has collected assistance by using a biometric verification with BIM. Reports can also be generated indicating which households have been served or which commodities have been distributed (UNHCR 2021a).

Details of disclosure and ways of transferring biometric data to third parties are not so transparent, at least, the details are known only to insiders. International organizations and governmental bodies may contact the UNHCR for information and in line with its data protection policy, it may share information with about 900 partners (UNHCR 2018: 56). Access to refugees' personal data collected by the UNHCR is not necessarily limited to the Jordanian MoI. In case of need, EU destination countries favoured by refugees might also get access to detailed information on refugees' personal data, travel routes, or history of financial transactions⁴ (Staton 2017; Jacobsen – Fast 2019: 161–164). Like other international databases, UNHCR databases might also be used for purposes such as counterterrorism or tracking migration routes (Staton 2017; Molnar 2020).

⁴Jordan has yet to adopt legislation on the protection of privacy and data protection rights, which is necessary to facilitate exchanges and cooperation with the EU in various fields, including law enforcement (COM 2019: 9).



As argued by [Jacobsen and Fast \(2019: 156\)](#), ‘humanitarian technology governance’ is a form of power that blurs control and care by inducing a process in which “subjects are being ‘cared for’ and at the same time dominated.” Following a summary of how iris scans are used in the context of aid provision, the rest of the paper will discuss a unique double bind embedded in the use of biometrics, which is equally composed of care and protection (registration, food security) on the one hand, control and coercion on the other.

4. IRIS SCANS AND SERVICE DELIVERY

With reference to the digitalization of food aid and assistance, over 60% of the Syrian refugee households reported that they received electronic food vouchers from the WFP ([Tiltnes et al. 2019: 59](#)). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire process ensuring better ‘food security,’⁵ so the discussion will be limited only to the use of iris scans in this context. Since 2013, the IrisGuard system has enabled humanitarian partners, commercial partners (supermarkets) and financial service providers (Cairo Amman Bank’s ATM network) to authenticate identity and qualification for assistance via their irises so that refugees could access food assistance without using vouchers, cards or PINs ([UNHCR 2017a](#)).

Iris scanning measures the unique patterns in a person’s irises. Beyond UNHCR-registration, iris scans are mainly used for authenticating identity in cases when aid (access to aid) is provided in form of ‘electronic cash’ (CVA) to Syrian refugees by the UNHCR or WFP. Connected to BIMS, IrisGuard provides a secure and encrypted network connection that can be used to authenticate refugees against biometric data stored in the UNHCR database. It is considered an effective identification and authentication tool due to the iris’ unique features and the protection of the iris from the environment and aging ([Sibai et al. 2011](#)). As cited by [Holloway et al. \(2021: 18\)](#), IrisGuard⁶ captures a greyscale image of the iris at registration and converts it to a unique verifiable identity. When a refugee looks into the scanner, the image is condensed down and encrypted before being sent through the infrastructure, then decrypted to be compared with the database records on the other side; the image itself is neither sent, nor stored on the camera itself according to a senior UNHCR field coordinator (cited by [Staton 2017](#)). The iris scanners are connected to the EyeCloud[®], a server run by UNHCR, which securely stores the iris template as well as other personal data.

The system also includes iris-enabled point-of-sale devices installed in ATM machines and supermarkets, known as EyeGuard AD100 ([IrisGuard 2021a](#)). There are about 200 ATMs in 85 branches of Cairo Amman bank, distributed in 12 governorates of Jordan, that allow withdrawal of money ([UNHCR 2017a](#)). Supermarkets such as the Sameh chain (composed of more than 20

⁵Refugees, depending on their eligibility may receive aid (money) from various actors, such as the UNHCR, the WFP or via the Common Cash Facility (CCF). Access requires authentication that can either be done by cards (using pin codes) or by refugee bodies (iris scans). The difference between the WFP and the UNHCR lies in eligibility – not all refugees are ‘poor enough’ (widows, very large families) to be eligible for aid from the UNHCR. The money on (bank) accounts over which refugees dispose includes aid (referred as CVA), that is, allowances from the UNHCR, WFP or other aid organizations. In cooperation with the Cairo Amman Bank, and IrisGuard, UNHCR also implemented the CCF pilot project, facilitating aid delivery of nine organizations to 90% of the non-encamped refugees in Jordan.

⁶The technology was developed by IrisGuard, a Jordanian company, in cooperation with Cairo Amman Bank around 2008. UNHCR and the World Bank joined the team later (cited by [Holloway et al. 2021: 18](#)).



branches in Jordan) allowing payment by iris scan identification can be found both inside and outside camps. As part of the payment transaction, refugees need to maintain a fixed stare for the iris-scanning machine to detect and record their iris-pattern and generate the iris-data in a demodulation process (Lemberg-Petersen – Haioty 2020).

Biometric authentication also involves certain algorithmic decision making, which makes intervention in refugees' lives and privacy inevitable (Jacobsen 2017; Lemberg-Petersen – Haioty 2020: 608; Beduschi 2021). How AI exactly works is disclosed neither by IrisGuard, nor by the UNHCR, but alternative descriptions of iris recognition techniques suggest that this may involve a type of data mining model known as a neural network, employing machine learning (Johns 2017a: 38; Johns 2017b). Once the iris is scanned, the biometric data is processed by machine learning concepts based on keystroke dynamics to classify the user's behavioural biometric in order to sort through the data and authenticate the person by correlation (between a given iris and all the iris-templates stored in the database). Obtaining an accurate classification performance depends on the accuracy of identification of the important features from the raw data. In other words, the quality of output is determined by the quality of the input.

Earlier research demonstrated that recognition accuracies can be as high as 93.33% (Sibai et al. 2011), but IrisGuard markets its technology by claiming that “[o]ur technology finds one person in millions, anywhere in the world, with 100% certainty, in less than 3 s [by means of] [e]nd-to-end iris recognition, verification, financial authentication and targeted cash transfer” (IrisGuard 2021b). Challenges may emerge only in case of rare eye diseases, typically among elderly people. To mitigate the challenges, UNHCR signed a contract with Cairo Amman Bank to provide the affected people with Visa cards which could be used easily by any member of the family.

5. CARE AND PROTECTION: ARGUMENTS FOR THE USE OF BIOMETRIC TECHNOLOGY

Ensuring food security and using biometric identification are closely related in Jordan.⁷ UNHCR and WFP claim that biometric verification is a method of ensuring efficiency and effectiveness. Effectiveness equally implies smoother access to aid if compared to earlier alternatives on the one hand and less fraud on the other hand (Holloway et al. 2021: 14–18). Activities of the UN agencies are also coordinated by using biometric data and digital technology in order to improve food security and nutritional status. It is often perceived as a contribution to better living standards and access to a more varied diet. According to official reports these efforts have not only led to a greater number of meals per day and diet diversity over time (UNCHR 2017a: 68), but have resulted in fewer food shortages (UNHCR 2017b: 70). From a donor perspectives, it also increased UNHCR's accountability (Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018: 1509).

⁷The perceived and measured food security of the Syrian refugees in Jordan varied throughout the years. Tiltnes et al. (2019: 57–59) found that the incidence of food insecurity was considerable among Syrian refugees in Jordan by estimating that the ‘moderate and severe prevalence’ rate of food insecurity was around 40 percent. The estimated ‘severe prevalence’ rate at 17.6 per cent is above the average severe prevalence rate of 12.0 for the region (Lebanon, Turkey).



Empirical data was in line with official ‘arguments for’, at least to some extent. Respondents in summer 2020 and 2021 too, expressed their satisfaction with the introduction of biometrics as tools solving their problems in four main areas: they experienced more freedom of choice, more effective services, better access to food and less fraud and well-preserved dignity.

The use of biometrics allowed them to exercise their *freedom of choice* by being able to purchase their food or non-food items without restrictions. Muhammad (P2) who arrived at Jordan in 2013 and raises five kids emphasized the benefits of freedom in the following way:

I have freedom of choice now, but in the past . . . major food commodities . . . like chocolate, Pepsi or detergents were not available to buy. [N]ow the situation is different as [we are] allowed to go to the bank and withdraw all the money and buy whatever we like. I have the freedom [to choose] how to spend money.

His family can spend about 100–200 JD on food each month. Access to cash assistance by means of iris scanning enabled refugee households to identify priorities, or consumer preferences, in line with the entire household budget. Perceptions gathered in both years prompt that refugees themselves want to be ‘consumers’ too and technology serves this instrumentally. Earlier research also demonstrated that the ‘financial inclusion’ of the world’s ‘unbanked population’ has not only been ambitioned by international development politics (Gabor – Brooks 2017), but also by international organizations being in charge of displacement management, such as the UNHCR. Yet, these efforts have entailed criticism warning that the use of biometrics in case of refugee/displacement management is “tuned to the managerial and financial interests responsible for re-assembling the surveillable refugee body and its rights, duties and entitlements” (Lemberg-Pedersen – Haitoy 2020: 620).

The use of iris scans was also perceived to be *more effective* if compared to the old methods in terms of access and delivery of humanitarian aid. According to most of our respondents approached in both years, the technology indeed served those refugees who needed assistance the most. The use of iris scans was generally perceived to speed up the process by providing refugees access to humanitarian aid (cash) more easily and quickly, which is in line with claims underpinning implementation globally. Efficiency was illustrated by the distribution of machines equipped with iris scan devices and the perceived convenience associated with the use of technology in food distribution. As Yahya (P3), having arrived in Jordan in 2013, registered in Azraq refugee camp, elaborated on it:

[P]eople are happy, especially those who got [various allowances] at the same time. For example, some of the [refugees] have big families. [They] get not only an ‘eye-print aid’ from UNCHR and ‘salary from WFP’, but also another ‘donations’ from UNICEF (monthly 25 JD per student).

These perceptions resonate well with official claims and arguments emphasizing improved efficiency, accuracy, and anti-fraud measures behind the implementation of tech-based, AI-supported solutions (UNHCR 2017b; 2017c). This, in turn, was perceived to contribute to organizing the process better and reducing the state of chaos that prevailed in the past. Having arrived in Jordan in 2015 and being a father of nine children, Khaled (P13) described the benefits of iris scans in the following way:

It is an accurate, easy and fast process. [By means of] eye-scanning [there is] no need to show some documents to prove my identity or wait several hours to receive the assistance. I do not need to go



back to my home empty-handed either because I forgot the correct password. All I need is to stare at the machine and all of the information appears on the screen.

Furthermore, by means of iris scans, refugees can access their money easily without any effort as they do not even have to memorize PIN codes or protect their bank cards. Such perceptions resonated well with earlier research demonstrating that the use of biometric technology helps those refugees who accidentally lost their identity papers or travel documents (Farraj 2011: 907–908). Concerned individuals do not have to wait long months for the government to issue new papers needed to access aid either. Biometric features cannot be lost and as long as the iris scan devices work and internet access is provided, access to aid (digital cash) is guaranteed. The merits of the system were only questioned by those respondents who were notified during the course of 2021 by the WFP that they would not be eligible for iris-allowance (see next section).

With regards to minimizing *fraud and misuse*, this objective has always been pursued by stakeholders, even in the non-digitalized context of refugee and displacement management (Jacobsen 2017: 537–538; Lemberg-Pedersen – Haioty 2020: 612). While donors are interested in saving money by minimizing fraud, refugees are more concerned with (un)justice in this context. At least half of our respondents approached in 2020 could recall stories about the creative use of in-kind assistance or vouchers. Having arrived in Jordan in 2014, father of six Abu Hussein (P5) put it this way:

Before applying this type of technology, such as eye-scanning, the situation was [unclear] and inaccurate. For example, when charitable societies or organizations contacted us to provide assistance, we could notice [many times] that some people received the food parcels 3 times! I mean, some people received a parcel, they went home, changed their dress and [returned to the NGO-office to] get [one more portion] again. It happened in front of me several times . . . but now this thing is impossible to occur due to the accuracy of this technology and nobody can fool or deceive [the UNHCR or WFP].

Less fraud – for example preventing double registration in the context of aid distribution – is advocated not only by donors whose interests are served by the mass collection and categorization of personal data as claimed by Farraj (2011: 915), but also made refugees believe that the system is not deceived by fellow refugees.

The use of iris scans seems to have created a kind of satisfaction among our respondents interviewed in 2020 as they saw not only their right to food served by technology but also their *right to dignity* too. Indeed, our respondents without exception agreed that the use of biometrics was much less humiliating than alternative ways of authentication, for example, presenting ID papers to people unknown to them. Being in a vulnerable and helpless situation, refugees felt that biometric authentication ensured their dignity in a manner that had been earlier denied to them. It can be illustrated by Mahmoud's assessment (P6) who arrived at Jordan in 2013 with his seven children:

I prefer dealing with a 'machine' not with human beings to preserve my dignity . . . of course, we all 'save our faces' when we deal with machines like ATMs, as it does not get angry and is not moody like human beings.

The question as to how to preserve the dignity of recipients should not be inseparable from aid distribution system. Unlike human beings, iris scan devices installed in ATMs or at



supermarket cashiers, do not judge the refugees by unsolicited comments or non-verbal communication means perceived to be inconvenient. The machines (at least these machines) neither detect the feelings of refugees nor recognize their needs; they also refrain from making comments so typical in human interactions. These aspects were consistently emphasized by our respondents on the 'arguments for' side.

These perceptions, however, challenge findings of a parallel research conducted in the same period. Of the 45 refugees interviewed for that study (Holloway et al. 2021: 19), only 10 preferred iris scans, while two-thirds of their respondents (29) preferred to receive cash assistance on an ATM card; six declined to state a preference because "they felt they had no choice in which one they received". The comparison reveals different dimensions of dignity: while Holloway et al. (2021: 31) associated it with choice ("giving people a choice (and perhaps even a false choice) is a sign of respect and upholds their dignity"), our respondents cited their feelings and not 'freedom of choice' in this context. The majority argued that they experienced much less anger, discrimination, or shame in their interactions vis-à-vis these authentication machines than earlier, when they had to rely on humans during the aid distribution process.

To sum up, the advancement of technology, especially in recent years has offered a great opportunity to improve people's living standards. Nine of our respondents approached in 2020 were convinced that their life would be worse without the use of biometrics. Not necessarily because they did not have security-, or privacy related concerns, but because CVA (WFP-assistance) were not withdrawn from people we talked to then. This situation had somewhat changed by summer 2021, making our respondents wonder why their biometric data was collected if the WFP reconsidered their eligibility and stopped sending money to their bank accounts.

6. COERCION AND CONTROL: ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE USE OF BIOMETRIC TECHNOLOGY

Identification and verification based on iris scans is a convenient method with benefits as demonstrated in the section above. However, biometric technologies have come under increased scrutiny due to concerns about human rights and accountability issues.

Earlier research exploring the use of biometric technologies in the context of displacement/mobility management drew attention to the following main risks and threats: UNHCR's weakening accountability towards the refugees (Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018); the blending of business interests with humanitarian motives (Lemberg-Pedersen – Haioti 2020; Madianou 2019b); trading humanitarian data in exchange for (food) aid (Sandvik 2019: 38–39); data extraction or technocolonialism (Madianou 2019a); surveillance and privacy challenges in the context of aid work (Hosein – Nyst 2013); strengthened and extended control over the mobility of populations and individuals that is not coupled with refugee agency regarding the data that are collected about them (Schoemaker et al. 2021: 4). Risks such as bias and discrimination, concerns with data protection and mass surveillance are issues that could not be mitigated or eliminated so far either (Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018: 1513–1515). While refugees are said to be among the beneficiaries enjoying the advantages of technology, perceptions of our respondents resonate well with the risks identified by these researchers. The discussion



will be limited to the collection and control of their data (digital bodies) and their movement (in physical terms) due to word count limits.

6.1. The legal basis and purposes for collecting personal (biometric) data

The collection and processing of refugees' biometric data, iris scans included, is regulated by the UNHCR (2015; 2018). With regards to the *legal basis of processing*, the UNHCR (2015) allows processing of personal data only in cases considered 'legitimate,' namely: (i) with the consent of the data subject, (ii) in the vital or best interests of the data subject, (iii) to enable the UNHCR to carry out its mandate (iv) beyond the UNHCR's mandate, to ensure the safety and security of persons of concern or other individuals.

Our respondents gave very diverse answers to the question if the UNHCR asked for their consent to collect their biometric data upon their arrival to Jordan. The majority interviewed in 2021 ($n = 34$) was unsure about how their consent was collected. Abu Hegazy (P11) recalled the registration process in the following way:

Yes, they asked for a verbal consent. I remember they asked *do you want to register with us?* And [the officer] explained to me some issues related to data protection and providing assistance [aid, services] to us . . . I remember that he said that I have the right to refuse the registration, but my reply was that *of course, I want to be registered.*

Others claimed that their consent was either not asked or they considered this matter less significant than their need for help. The way how the UNHCR communicated vis-à-vis the refugees likely varied from officer to officer and across time too. It likely depended also on how officers assessed the refugees' (digital) literacy skills (Schoemaker et al. 2021; Holloway et al. 2021).

For a consent to be truly informed, at least two pre-conditions should be fulfilled: information is to be provided and an alternative way of registering should be offered by the data controller. In absence of meaningful choice, it is 'informed coercion' (Holloway et al. 2021: 30). Therefore, the matter of consent (as legal basis) is closely related to the information to be provided before personal (biometric) data is collected. According to the UNHCR's relevant privacy policy (UNHCR 2015: 19), refugees should be provided information on eight different aspects of data processing, namely, the specific purpose(s) for which the personal data or categories of personal data will be processed; whether such data will be transferred to Implementing Partner(s) or third parties; the importance of the data subject providing accurate and complete information; the data subject's duty to keep the UNHCR, and/or, as appropriate, Implementing Partners, informed of changes to their personal situation; any consequences for refusing or failing to provide the requested personal data; the data subject's right to request access to their personal data, or correction or deletion of it; the data subject's right to object to the collection of personal data; and how to lodge a complaint with the data controller and with the Inspector General's Office.

It is difficult to verify how information was provided to our respondents as we could not make interviews with those officers whom they met years ago. Yet, our data and earlier research (Schoemaker 2021; Holloway et al. 2021) equally indicate that refugees conflate various purposes of processing (foundational: registration; functional: access to food aid or CVA) and do not necessarily understand the difference either, with regards to the consequences for refusing or failing to provide the requested personal data. Most of our respondents were also puzzled over



this issue especially in cases when their biometric data was collected, and assistance was suspended for any reason (see later).

Before discussing the purposes of processing, it must be noted that advocates for human rights (in the context of digitalization) argue that consent cannot be the proper basis of collecting personal data, simply because in most humanitarian context, the individual is not in the position to give a proper consent (freely, based on information, etc), that is, to take responsibility for his/her decision to share personal data. As argued, among others, by Marwa Fatafta, MENA Policy Manager at *Access Now* (2021):

When you have no choice, you can't consent. [F]orcing people with little recourse, such as refugees, to surrender private information in exchange for food is an affront to human rights standards, and an insult to human dignity. WFP and UNHCR have willingly unleashed iris scan tech upon at-risk communities, and must, at a minimum, be aware of the potential consequences of their actions.

The inability to provide consent, however, does not mean that services cannot be provided. Humanitarian actors can rely on another lawful basis for data processing, for example the vital interests of the data subjects. All major data protection standards and laws ([International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#), [General Data Protection Regulation](#), [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#), [African Union](#), etc.) recognise other lawful bases for data processing beyond consent. Regardless of the chosen legal basis, information is to be provided on processing (registration, providing aid or other services or sharing data with third parties).

With regards to the *purposes of processing*, most of our respondents claimed that they were not briefed about the exact purposes of processing. The UNHCR simply talked about registration and better access to aid by conflating these purposes from refugee perspectives (cf. [Holloway et al. 2021](#): 30). If a third purpose, namely, data transfer to and from third parties (local governments, UNHCR offices in other countries or border control authorities) was mentioned, it happened in the context of resettlement programs. Refugees, however, are more concerned with how their data is transferred among border control authorities and the UNHCR. Dalal (P15), a 34-years-old female refugee with 6 children, who had been living in Jordan before the Syrian civil war began and became a refugee later, recalled her experiences in the following way:

My husband was working in Jordan before the war and my residency was divided between Jordan and Syria then. When I moved to Jordan in 2012 [after the situation deteriorated in Syria] I was not a refugee because I did not register then . . . when [after a year] my sons needed emergency surgery, the hospital told us to go to the UNHCR and register [in order to get] free surgery . . . what surprised me then, during the registration process [in 2013] was that the UNHCR had data about my travel history (exit and entry to Jordan) . . . I think, there is a link between the [border control authorities and the UNHCR].

The essence of this link was by no means clear to the individuals whom we talked to. Such experiences seem to strengthen arguments on the weak downward (un)accountability of the UNHCR vis-à-vis its beneficiaries ([Jacobsen – Sandvik 2018](#); [Jacobsen 2016](#)).

The point of collecting and storing personal data, especially biometric data, was questioned in cases when WFP aid (CVA) had been suspended: right before fieldwork commenced in July. The WFP announced in early June that 21,000 Syrian refugees would no longer receive their monthly food assistance as of July following a prioritization exercise driven by a shortage of funds ([WFP 2021](#)).



About one third of our respondents interviewed in 2021 reported that the WFP stopped providing them cash assistance (15 JD per person monthly). While according to the WFP, “a quarter of Syrian refugees in Jordan are now food insecure and almost two thirds are on the brink of food insecurity” and frustration and anger is detectable among the refugees, the biometric data collected earlier cannot be returned to their owners. The frustration expressed on various social media posts can be illustrated by Khaled’s words (P13):

I did not get any benefit from registration with the UNHCR, expect two things: obtaining a refugee card that prove[s] that I am a legal refugee in Jordan and the monthly allowance from the WFP (only 15 JDs) – which was recently suspended. Frankly, most of the host countries [and international organizations] used us [Syrian refugees] as pressure cards to get millions of dollars from abroad and they give us just a little amount of money . . . I think, it [was] the main reason for registering us. Of course, no one, has declared it [openly], but it is being circulated among many Syrians, but few dare to speak about this issue.

This purpose of fundraising, indeed, is not listed as such in the UNHCR’s privacy policies. About half of our respondents interviewed in 2021 complained and raised similar questions about the purposes of collecting their data. Doubts were expressed, among others, by Jafar (P33), a 49-year-old father of seven who has been living in Jordan since 2014. He lost not only his job during the COVID-19 lockdown in Jordan, but the WFP also withdrew his monthly allowance (CVA):

Just a few months ago, my family received 135 dinars per month as assistance from the WFP, [but recently] they suspend our monthly allowance! Frankly, one of the most important reasons that encouraged me to register [my biometric data] with the UNHCR was to get aid for my family, now I can say that the humanitarian organizations gradually started to shrink their responsibility toward us, so why did they register us and take all our information if in the end they cut off aid?!

Refugees interviewed in the 2021, almost without exception, were concerned with decreasing access to food (payment by iris scan) and a disrupted flow of allowances. Therefore, according to their perceptions, there was no point to scan their iris in supermarkets for there was no money on their bank accounts. These refugees wondered why collecting and storing their data was needed, if CVA (and food aid) was not available to them anymore.

6.2. Data transfers and control of movement

When asked about the security of their personal data, most of our respondents recalled their initial anxiety upon arrival and registration. They agreed that any accidental or intentional leak of personal data was perceived to be life-threatening to Syrian refugees as it made already vulnerable refugees even more vulnerable. If, for example, the Syrian government gained access to their biometric data, it could harm not only refugees’ rights but also their lives. These fears, nevertheless, were somehow mitigated by the UNHCR officers and the majority of our respondents (in both years) could recall verbal assurances the UNHCR provided to them. As recalled by Yahya (P3) who arrived in Jordan in 2013 and was registered in Azraq refugee camp:

UNCHR officers assured us that nothing like this will happen [saying that their] work is to help, protect, and serve [us] and once the crisis ends and the situation becomes calm, [we would] return to [our] country without any problems. The [biometric] information that [was] taken [is] completely confidential and no one will see it except us [the UNHCR].



With regards to confidentiality, UNHCR field offices have got access to personal data even abroad in the four main states hosting the refugees in the region, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey. Our respondents did not demonstrate a good knowledge regarding which actors can access to their data even if the above cited data protection policy (UNHCR 2015: 19) says that it should be explained “whether such data will be transferred to Implementing Partner(s) or third parties” to the persons of concern. The majority of our respondents believed that it was only the UNHCR and the government in Jordan. Five of them, however, could recall stories illustrating their doubts. For example, Sabah (P9), a woman visiting her sister in Lebanon had to go to a UNHCR-office and the officer she encountered was aware of the place of her registration:

The iris scan is very accurate technology . . . I went to Beirut some time ago to visit my sister, and as soon as I visited the UNHCR office, the employee asked me “you live in Jordan, do you not?”

Refugees, admittedly, rarely scrutinize privacy notices, but rumours around their personal and biometric data being shared by the UNHCR obviously affects their decisions. Khaled (P13), for example, whom we cited earlier and who is a head of a large family with 13 members (3 wives, 9 children) arrived at Jordan in 2011. Although their living conditions deteriorated considerably in the past years, he has been discouraged from travelling illegally by rumours about his file being shared with western countries:

Our data could be shared with other countries such as the EU and the USA. I have not heard this information from an official source, but many Syrian talk about this issue. Frankly, I have many relatives living in Germany, and they told me that Germany has got [our data], especially the iris scan, they have a copy there. My financial situation here is bad and I had the idea to escape to Europe through the Turkish border illegally, but due to these complicated procedures, I changed my mind.

As illustrated by these stories, refugees can guess and speculate, but cannot know for sure who has access to their personal files, biometric data included. Even if they are the data subjects, owners of their personal data, their control over their data (and let us add, over their lives) was lost in the very moment when they were registered by the UNHCR. Considering that many refugees are uninformed, if not illiterate, it is not an exaggeration to claim that refugees, in general, are unaware of the practices of data transfers between the UNHCR and governmental agencies and between UNHCR and commercial companies (cf. Schoemaker et al. 2021). Recalling our interviews, the majority of the respondents were also puzzled over the consequences of taking their biometric data.

While confirming the validity of rumours is not easy, a letter containing a long list of questions addressed to the UNHCR and the WFP in autumn 2020 by Access Now, an advocacy organization in the region, illustrates well that that data processing activities (transfer included) are by no ways clear to the wider public (Access Now 2020). Confusion and uncertainty around the purpose of biometric processing illustrate how millions of refugees are lured into a unique situation: their biometric data is collected for the purpose of protection (registration and identity, after all, protection is a right) with the promise of easier access to food and services, while their movement is controlled or constrained in the very moment when their data was taken. If technology and AI is about mathematics, the old criticism concerning the role of applied mathematics, that is statistics, in population management applies. Official actors are obviously interested in creating ‘legible’ populations to keep them under control (Scott 1990: 183), in the context of migration/displacement management too. The use of biometrics not only



makes this easy (Ajana 2013; Madianou 2019a; Madianou 2019b: 8–10), but also makes UN organizations complicit in donor and state surveillance (Jacobsen – Fast 2019: 161–163).

While refugees are required to share their biometric data without knowing how these data would be used (or with the promise of better access to food), the assumed intensive cooperation among international organizations and national border control and immigration authorities prevents their free movement, at least on the level of their perception. Therefore, as argued by Madianou (2019b: 9–10) “biometric data are ultimate instruments of control” and “biometrics can have devastating consequences both *when they fail and when they succeed*” (emphasis added), which is the very essence of the double bind.

Indeed, refugees are unable to resolve the conflict between the demand placed by the primary injunction (share your biometrics upon registration, or there is no access to iris-based CVA) and that of the secondary injunction (share your biometrics data, and the UNHCR and the Jordanian government will easily control your movement and travel). Neither the UNHCR, nor the local government can prevent leave, but they can punish refugees testing the system as Ahlam’s story illustrates:

One of my cousins [a registered refugee] went to Syria. She returned and the WFP took her iris for a regular verification last week in Mecca Mall in Amman, she got into trouble. The system sent a message to the officers indicating that the owner of the iris was abroad without permission.

Being in Syria or crossing the border means that the WFP will suspend the assistance, unless the concerned refugee informs the Jordanian MoI in advance. Travel has to be permitted and cannot last more than two months, otherwise the WFP will cut off the aid.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of our research has been to contribute to the literature discussing the dilemmas associated with the widespread use of biometric technology, by exploring whether arguments cited for (care) and against the use of biometric technologies (control) are justified in practice. Claims known from the literature were illustrated by empirical data collected among Syrian refugees residing in Amman in the summer of 2020 and 2021.

International assistance in general, refugee protection, in particular, serves not only purposes such as the fulfilment of human rights and the ‘right to development’ or mitigating suffering in humanitarian contexts in the Global South, but also donor and governmental interests regarding population management and surveillance (Hayes 2017). The securitization of humanitarianism and the nexus of security concerns and international assistance is widely discussed in the literature both in the context of development aid and humanitarian work in the Global South (Duffield 2001; Tschirgi 2018; Abrahamsen – Sandor 2018; Duffield 2016). As a result, and following Pallister-Wilkins (2015: 54), refugees are equally treated as subjects ‘at risk’ (deserving better access to aid by taking their biometric data to mitigate the risks they face) and ‘as risk’ (requiring the collection of their biometric data for minimizing the risk they may mean to others) in various contexts. From a different perspective, the near certainty of a match offered by iris scanning is both a benefit (when it is about providing assistance) and a risk (when it comes to controlling refugees’ free movement).

While the use of biometric registration may strengthen certain rights of the refugees, such as better access to food or the right to dignity, it cannot but weaken their position on other terms.



However, the use of biometric technology is not a matter of option. Once introduced, refugees cannot really say that they want their data returned. While the WFP may say that it withdraws funding from families for shortage in funding, the biometric data can neither be returned to the refugees, nor deleted – simply because it is simultaneously used for multiple purposes (registration, care, movement control, accountability towards donors, that is, even legal compliance), and as such, it is detached from the will or agency of right holders (owners of the biometric data). Recalling Hayes (2017: 200) all personal data relating to the UNHCR’s beneficiaries has been considered part of their case files, so “the working assumption is – contrary to the organization’s data protection provisions – that everything should be kept forever.”

To sum up, the use of biometric data in protection seems to facilitate a double bind. It contributes to fulfilling the rights and needs of refugees, but also entails risks of control as demonstrated by earlier research and illustrated by perceptions of our respondents. As typical in double bind situations, the dependent subject (the registered refugee in our case) is unable to foresee and resolve the conflict between the demand placed by the primary injunction (if you do not share your biometric data for the sake of registration, you will not get access to given types of aid) and that of the secondary injunction (if you share your biometric data, you will be subjected to control).

The type of punishment is different, the first being the denial of care and assistance, the second being about exercising control over the movement of refugees. In other words, it is the digitalized protection (based on biometric data) itself that makes it harder for refugees to leave the refugee-life behind, the venue of which was Jordan in our case. While the current understanding of schizophrenia is not based on Bateson’s idea of the double bind, the complex situation in which refugees are expected to navigate due to their biometric data being taken and held by the UNHCR conjures up a vicious cycle they cannot escape.

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