Refugees and Migration Movements in the Middle East

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
Introduction:
Refugees and Displacement in the Middle East

Marc Lynch, POMEPS and George Washington University
Laurie Brand, University of Southern California

The Middle East has experienced a dramatic flood of refugees and forced migration over the last fifteen years. The UN High Commission on Refugees reports more than 16 million refugees and 60 million displaced persons around the world today, including asylum seekers and the internally displaced. The wars in Syria and Iraq have produced the greatest share of the Middle East’s refugees in recent years, but many more have fled wars and failed states in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Neighboring states have faced severe challenges in absorbing millions of refugees, while North African states and Turkey have emerged as key transit hubs for refugee flows into Europe.

To examine the situation of current refugees and exiles in and from the region, the Project on Middle East Political Science and the Middle East Studies Program at the University of Southern California with support from its Center for International Studies convened a workshop in February 2017 bringing together a dozen scholars from multiple disciplines. These scholars represent a new wave of scholars conducting original field research from refugee camps and communities in the Middle East, primarily in states bordering Syria and Iraq. Their research demonstrates the transformative impact on every aspect of politics, economies, societies and states of these massive forced population movements, both within and across borders.

The workshop and papers raise a number of important research questions and challenges:

What is new about this wave of refugees?

The brutal realities of the last century suggest that there is nothing particularly novel about the large-scale forced movement of populations. What, if anything, makes this era different? Is it simply the number of people in motion? Is it their concentration in areas of conventional strategic and political interest? Is it the immediacy of social media? Is it because those refugees began to arrive on European shores in unparalleled numbers, as Achilli suggests, and been made into a security issue in American politics?

While scholars of migration differ on whether the current period has produced the largest migration flows in human history, there is no question of the tremendous number of people involved. Much such population movement takes place within countries, often from rural to urban areas. Yet, the highest profile cases are those that involve the crossing of national boundaries, whether as the result of economic crises or proximity of physical danger.
These population movements should be placed at the center of political science and contemporary history. Across the globe in the 20th century witnessed numerous, major population movements: the rise of nationalism, fascism and totalitarianism, the disintegration of empires, the emergence of modern nation-states, all led to large-scale forced movement of peoples. Of course, inter-state wars are not the only triggers of large-scale population movement. Decolonization following World War II and the conflicts surrounding the Cold War also produced dramatic episodes of dislocation. The state-building that followed the withdrawal of the imperial powers from their former colonies often failed to secure the bases of sustainable economic and political development. As a result, labor recruitment ties established prior to independence were continued or reactivated to provide a safety value to lessen unemployment by exporting laborers to the global north. In other cases, interference by external powers, whether through internal subversion or direct military intervention prevented new leaderships from consolidating power. The resultant conflicts have also often created significant refugee flows. The process by which these new nations and states emerged generated new ideas about citizenship and helped drive the construction of international regimes governing migration and the treatment of refugees.

While refugee production is by no means particular to the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, episodes of forced migration have shaped a good deal of its post-world war II history. The partition of Palestine in 1947 and the subsequent 1948 War generated one of the longest-lasting and most politically fateful refugee waves. Refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria as well as in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are constant reminders of the forced displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians in 1947-48. The 1967 June War then displaced many of these 1948 refugees for a second time as it also added to their numbers.

The region has witnessed many other large-scale forced population movements. Modern Turkey was created through the dispossession of vast numbers of non-Turkish residents of the Ottoman Empire, most notably in the genocidal treatment of the Armenians. The liberation of Algeria from French rule drove hundreds of thousands of pieds noirs and harkis to mainland France. The Lebanese civil war (1975-91) led to the departure of some one-quarter of the Lebanese population. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then Desert Storm saw a mass exodus of both Arab (overwhelmingly Palestinian) and non-Arab expatriate workers from Kuwait, as well as the expulsion from Saudi Arabia of hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers. The brutal sanctions regime imposed on Iraq in the wake of the military conflict led many Iraqis to leave their homeland in the 1990s.

The current waves of refugees from the Levant can largely be traced to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent civil war, which produced an estimated 6 million refugees and a similar number of internally displaced. The ethnic and sectarian transformation of Iraq triggered region-wide sectarianism and galvanized jihadist movements. The population movements put enormous strain on the infrastructure of Jordan, Syria and other neighboring states, while introducing a semi-permanent presence of international organizations into the everyday governance of these non-citizen populations.
These same regional dynamics then influenced the way the so-called Arab spring affected Syria, one of the most devastating elements of which has been a refugee crisis that dwarfs even that of Iraq. The U.N. estimates that more than 6 million Syrians have fled the country, while another 10 million have been internally displaced. The size of the displacement of the Syrian population, both internally and beyond the country’s borders, can distract from other parallel catastrophes. The collapse of the Libyan state has produced a wave of Libyan refugees, while migrants from sub-Saharan Africa whose passage Qaddafi once served to interdict continue to transit through Libya and depart from there and other parts of the North African littoral en route to Europe. The war in Yemen has also produced massive internal displacement, even if a naval and land blockade has prevented most from fleeing the country. The situation of these (and other) refugee populations in the region will continue to have an impact, not only on regional security, but also on the regional political economy and political development into the foreseeable future.

**Are refugees changing the practice of sovereignty in the Middle East?**

Several of the papers examine how the massive movement of peoples is challenging core elements of state sovereignty. The most obvious manifestation of this challenge relates to undocumented border crossings and what Dionigi calls the softening of borders. Borders, as Arar, Hamdan and Mourad demonstrate, are not what they used to be. War economies and the provision of refugee support involve cross-border networks of people, goods, services and weapons. Borders filter these flows in varying ways, sometimes allowing nearly uninterrupted movement into war zones (as with Turkey during much of the Syrian war) and sometimes tightening them to choke off flows (as with Jordan during the Syrian war’s later years).

Other less formal aspects of sovereignty are also under siege. States like Jordan and Lebanon, already poorly equipped to provide security and services—from education and health care to basic foodstuffs and affordable housing—to their citizens now face the demands of millions of non-nationals. In some cases, services required by refugees have been outsourced to or taken on by NGOs and international organizations, as Hamdan and Arar observe, creating structures resembling those of state. This poses serious conceptual and political questions when refugee populations in states such as Jordan and Lebanon, where refugee populations (Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian) constitute well more than a quarter of the total population and most are not housed within geographically distinct refugee camps.

**What political forms may emerge in these refugee diasporas?**

As it becomes clear that Syrian and other refugees will not soon return home, will they develop extraterritorial forms of political/national identity and activism? Will there someday be a Syrian equivalent of the Palestinian Liberation Organization? How will diaspora political institutions relate to the homelands and the delicate political arrangements emerging from theses wars?

The papers in this collection document surprising trends in activism and organization among refugee communities. Clarke and Khoury each point to forms of political activism within refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, examining the nature of refugee protests as well as ways in which
political activism may be channeled into non-political activity. Sometimes these activities focus on the provision of services and the representation of refugee interests within camps, while other activism focuses on supporting the broader war. Zeno points to the centrality of narratives of humiliation and pride, thereby interrogating both changing identities as well as the possibilities for future national reconciliation. But many refugees, as Sheldon observes among Iraqis in Jordan, will likely wish for nothing more than to forget politics and build new lives far from the destroyed homeland, raising the question of the lifespan of the desire for return and blurring the lines between refugee and exile.

**What can become of the next generation?**

Save the Children recently released a report documenting almost unbelievable trauma among Syrian children. Hundreds of thousands of these children have known nothing but war, death, dispossession and loss. Enrollment in primary education has dropped from 98 percent before the war to 61.5 percent this year, leading many observers to speculate that an entire generation risks being lost both in human terms as well as to Syria’s future rebuilding. Significant research has been done globally on the experience of children in war zones that shows the daunting challenges for the next generation. Some of that research shows far greater resilience and adaptability than might be expected, however, particularly after the fighting ends. Political scientists should be working now on identifying the conditions and the mechanisms by which these displaced children might be best reintegrated politically and socially in the years to come.

**How may the presence of refugees or refugee camps/concentrations contribute to security threats and radicalization?**

Radicalization may not be the most important question for the lives of the millions of displaced citizens, but it is the one, which most interests governments around the world. Lichtenheld explores the underlying strategic logic of the decisions of militias in the Syrian conflict to uproot or displace certain populations. Many fear, based on past historical experience, that refugee camps and communities would become prime recruiting grounds for jihadist organizations and other extremists.

The securitization of the refugee issue, understanding the problem primarily through the lens of security threats and radicalization, carries many costs. As Pearlman has observed, radicalization captures very little of the lived experience of the vast majority of Syrian refugees. Most are ordinary people struggling to rebuild their lives from the ruins of overwhelming trauma. Treating these refugees primarily as potential security threats, whether through the destabilization of host countries or through recruitment into terrorism, does a profound injustice to their real problems. Researchers must find ways to take seriously the security challenges posed by large refugee and displaced communities without giving in to the unwarranted securitization of these populations.
What ethical obligations do political scientists have towards these refugees? A final thread ran through the margins of the workshop. A significant body of new research has treated Syrian refugees as an available group of interview subjects for survey experiment research. This work is generally well intentioned, has produced important findings, and is the only plausible way to get access to Syrian opinion. Still, it raises troubling ethical questions. What are the ethical implications of treating traumatized, displaced populations primarily as objects of research? Are we qualified to conduct interviews with traumatized populations? Is it acceptable to conduct experiments of any kind on traumatized populations, or to use them for normal political science questions? What expectations of aid or concern are raised by the simple act of asking questions?

These fundamental questions of research ethics will only become more central to the practice of political science as the demand for research on and with refugees grows. Political scientists working in and studying the Middle East should learn from and remain constantly engaged with the vibrant literature and debates about research ethics in conflict areas.

Overall, the papers in the workshop represent an important window into a vitally important research area for the political science of the Middle East. The questions they raise are at the center of today’s challenges to states and societies, and will become ever more so in the coming years.

Marc Lynch is a professor of political science at the George Washington University and is the director of the Project on Middle East Political Science.

Laurie Brand is the Robert Grandford Wright Professor of International Relations and Middle East Studies at the University of Southern California. She is also the Chair of the Middle East Studies Association’s Committee on Academic Freedom.
The Nexus: Human Smuggling and Syrian Refugees’ Trajectories across the Middle East and the Balkans

Luigi Achilli, European University Institute

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, millions of people are estimated to have fled their homes. This tragedy generated a real state of emergency in Europe, with public opinion both confused and terrified by photos of corpses lying on the shores and aggressive strangers trying to push through Europe’s security borders. These images often accompany reports of poor and desperate individuals, deceived by organized crime cartels. In these accounts, the ultimate responsibility of this tragedy are the human smuggling networks— mafia-like cartels of hardened and greedy criminals dedicated to the systematic deceiving and conning of migrants. However, journalists and policy makers do not have an adequate understanding of the relationship between smugglers and migrants— and consistently fail to address the inner dynamics of human smuggling.

Smugglers are often the only available option for those individuals who flee a situation of immediate danger and distress. However, migrants and asylum seekers’ desperate need of finding a refuge and their difficulty to access legal channels of mobility alone are not sufficient to explain the resilience and strength of the bonds between them and the smugglers. To understand this complexity we need to shift the attention away from the categorization of smugglers as reckless businessmen toward an exploration of smuggling moral economy.¹ What I argue here is that the relationship of trust between the smugglers and the migrants— as I encountered it during my fieldwork —does not only build on refugees’ desperate need for safety, but it is also embedded within patterns of solidarity and reciprocity and grounded on local notions of moral personhood. Far from their depiction of reckless criminal driven only by profit, smugglers sought and often found moral legitimation by negotiating long-held notions of morality and religious duties with the realities of being involved into what is popularly perceived as a criminal activity.

At the time of my fieldwork, Syrian refugees had ideally two options to reach Europe: one was legal, through resettlement programs, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programmes, private sponsorships, etc. The other option was— for the majority of them— the Balkan route: an exhausting and perilous journey that took them across two continents and several countries (i.e. Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia).² The former was by far the safest and quickest route. Yet, the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU member states remained for the very large majority of them a chimera.³

Virtually all the people that I interviewed crossed Turkey. Over the past years, the country has become a gathering point for Syrian refugees travelling from Syria and its neighbouring countries to Europe. However, while the country was and still is an obligatory step for the majority of Syrian refugees, displacement patterns to Turkey largely depended on the possession of valid documentation. Syrians with a valid passport travelled regularly to Turkey either by plane from Amman, Beirut, or Erbil or by boat from Tripoli in Lebanon. On the other hand, the large majority of Syrian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Palestinian refugees from Syria, and those without a valid passport embarked on a longer and more dangerous journey to Turkey— often inland— that exposed them to greater risks of exploitation.

¹ My research is largely based on interviews and participant observation with Syrian refugees and smugglers themselves held in Turkey and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, Jordan, Italy and the so-called “Balkan route” (Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia) intermittently throughout 2015 and 2016. While open and semi-structured interviews and field notes remained the most important part of the research, I devoted also part of time to participant observation.

² The situation has changed since early 2016. The EU-Turkey agreement on March 20 and the decision of Macedonia (FYROM) to seal its border with Greece in February seem to have considerably stemmed the flow of people Balkan route.

³ Achilli, 2016.
Smugglers operated almost exclusively in Turkey. The vast majority of those interviewed indicated that they had reached Greece from the isolated areas near the Turkish port of Izmir and Bodrum. Here, smugglers arranged transportation, for around 1200 USD per person to Lesvos or the numerous Greek islands near the border with Turkey. The proximity of the departure point with the Greek islands often meant a one-hour journey with a ten-metre rubber dinghy. Time and price, however, were likely to change according to a number of factors that ranged from the type of boat and number of people aboard to the weather condition and the relationship with the smugglers. The material and affective politics of these connections reveals the unhelpfulness of describing smugglers only in terms of cruel and reckless criminal driven exclusively by profits.

Of course, stories and rumours about migrants and their families deceived, exploited, and mistreated by smugglers were relatively common among my informants. Even some of the smugglers that I interviewed conceded as much: “Smugglers are not all good,” I was told by a few of them. Nonetheless, recent studies based on empirical evidence challenge the image of a few criminal masterminds who control a network of hardened crooks devoted to the systematic enslavement of vulnerable migrants.\(^4\)

Against this backdrop, the question is: what does smuggling human beings in an honest and ethical manner entail? An answer of this kind should take into account local notions of morality and the broader socio-political context in which the act of smuggling takes place.

Syrians use the Arabic term *muharrib* to indicate the “smuggler.” The word does not have necessarily a negative connotation (even though it often does). The term can simply refer to someone who sneaks something or someone in undetected for either positive or negative intents. Among my informants, for example, smuggling was not only about profiting as the *muharrib* was not necessarily driven by material gain. It entailed a range of practices encompassing honesty and moral conduct. It involved for the smugglers restricting their margin of profit, using good-quality boats, and displaying civilized and refined manners with their customers. Along this line, they regarded as immoral any misconduct relating to the smugglers’ quality of services or treatment of customers and, in general, the intention to profit of migrants’ situation in order to get shamelessly rich. This is the story of Abu Hamza.

Abu Hamza was well known among Syrian refugees for being respectable. The first time I met him was in Elgar, in the courtyard of a four-star hotel near the city center. The man was sitting around a table and sipping a cup of tea while juggling three mobile phones. He was arranging the arrival to the city of a new batch of people wishing to cross the narrow stretch of water that separates Western Turkey

\(^4\) For example, see Sanchez 2015, Zhang and Chin 2002.
from Greek shores. With him, a bunch of boys and young men sat: Abu Hamza introduced them to me as his crew. As I came to discover soon after, it was a mixed group that comprised both migrants and smugglers. However, it was difficult to tell them apart. No distinguishing marks, no details of moral conduct could indicate “smugglers” and “their clients” as belonging to two distinct social types. They were all Syrians; all stuck along the route to Europe. Even Abu Hamza was seeking asylum in Europe. As like many others, he left Syria in 2012, taking the route to Italy via Libya. However, his journey abruptly stopped in Egypt, where local authorities detained him for a few months before sending him back to Lebanon. He tried again. The second time he took the Balkan route: Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. Yet again, he did not make it. While waiting on the western shores of Turkey to be smuggled into Europe, Abu Hamza changed his mind: “I could not any longer watch my fellow country mates suffering in Syria or being exploited by smugglers and locals in Turkey. I decided to do something for them.”

A smuggled migrant himself, Abu Hamza knew the basics of the job. Owning a jewellery shop back in his village in Syria, he also had some financial liquidity to expedite the setting up of his venture. He found a Turkish associate in order to minimizing risks—the man’s personal contacts and knowledge of the country were crucial to set up the activity. This is how Abu Hamza became a smuggler, a good one, as he put it. At the time of my research, around 30 people worked more or less steadily for the organization, helping fellow Syrians reach whatever was their destination in Europe.

In this sense, more than anything else, it is the outcome of the smuggling process that conjures up the “ethical scene” through which migrants and smugglers constitute themselves as a moral community against an immoral “Europe.” With few notable exceptions, all interviewed refugees who applied for resettlement had their application either rejected or left pending for an indefinite lapse of time. Successfully smuggled migrants who I interviewed relied upon smugglers to reunite with their families left back in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq. Ahmad was one such person. The man was in his late teens when he left Syria for Sweden in 2012. It took this adolescent and his sixteen-year brother around four months to reach their destination. I met Ahmad in Turkey. He flew from Sweden to meet his mother, sisters, and bride—who he entrusted to the same smugglers that helped him and his little brother to reach Europe years earlier. He spent the few days prior their departure with them, instructing his family on the different legs of the journey. When his family finally departed, Ahmad tracked on the smugglers’ GPS his family’s journey to Greece. He left Turkey only when he received confirmation from his fiancé that they had reached Greek shores.

However, Ahmad’s decision to entrust their family members to a smuggler was not only based on cost-benefit calculations, but also on the idea of belonging to the same ethnic and moral community in exile. The time migrants spend with smuggler was functional for strengthening these social bonds. Indeed, for smugglers, many of the migrants were not only customers but also friends or fellow nationals. The time prior the departure provided migrants and smugglers with complex opportunities to mingle, interactions that went beyond simple working relationships. In Elgar, a coastal town in western Turkey, smugglers and migrants slept in the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants, and hung around the same bars. Mahmud, a young Syrian man in early 20s, was among them. His story highlights everyday practice of coexistence among smugglers and migrants—and the strong bond that can arise out of the time spent together. The young man spent over a month in Elgar with Abu Hamza and his crew. He first waited for his brother to send him the money to pay for his journey to Greece; then, he waited for the sea to be calm enough to allow his departure. When the time finally came, Mahmud did not want to leave anymore: after a month spent living together with the same people who were supposed to smuggle him to Greece, he established a solid friendship with many of them. When I asked him the reason for his reticence to leave, Mahmud replied: “I left my family in Syria; I found a new one here. Now, I don’t

5 Cohen, 2011.
want to lose my family again.” Mahmud eventually left, but with the promise to his new friends that he would have come back as soon as he obtained the refugee status in Germany.

Undoubtedly, the pattern of human smuggling that I encountered should not distract from other crueler forms. The media consistently reports about the brutality of smugglers and the plight of migrants. However, the high visibility of this narrative risks overshadowing the brutality of the state and their reasons for leaving. This narrative also neglects to show that smugglers help refugees navigate the unequal geographies of mobility. The resilience of smuggling networks, amid numerous attempts by nation states and border control agencies to crackdown on them, serves as constant reminders not only of migrants’ determination to flee their countries, but also of the strong bond between smugglers and their customers. These bonds feed into shared frameworks of morality and piety.

Luigi Achilli is a research associate in the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute.

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For example, see İçli, Sever and Sever, 2015.
Leveraging Sovereignty:  
The Case of Jordan and the International Refugee Regime

Rawan Arar, University of California

At the heart of the nation-state system and the international refugee regime is the principle of sovereignty—a state’s ultimate control within its specified territory, and its externally recognized right to claim legitimate authority over its internal affairs. The nation-state system is a collection of sovereign states; therefore, the principle of sovereignty exists for each individual state and as part of a system that governs international relations. These two workings of sovereignty become mutually constitutive because the behaviors of sovereign states are often influenced by regional or global considerations. In principle, all states have the right to claim sovereignty despite wealth or power; in practice, however, wealthier and more powerful states are better equipped to protect their sovereign interests. The international refugee regime is grounded in these two aspects of sovereignty—the authority of the individual sovereign state and the constraints or opportunities that exists within the system of sovereign states.

Figure 1: Two distinct aspects of sovereignty.

The principle of sovereignty is a primary consideration in deciding who qualifies as a refugee under international law. Refugee status, and the protections it entails, are contingent upon crossing state borders. Approximately 65 million people were forcibly displaced in 2016. While many of these people have suffered comparable persecution, they do not all receive the same legal protections. Forced migrants fall into different legal categories that are determined by where a person is geographically located. A refugee is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country…” (Article 1 [A]2 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, emphasis is mine). This legal caveat is included to uphold the conflict state’s sovereignty. Refugees could not exist without the nation-state system, the legitimacy given to state borders, and the international norm of non-interference.1

Not only does sovereignty shape who a refugee is, the principle of sovereignty also shapes the global distribution of refugees and the challenges that states face to receive refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reports that developing countries in the Global South (GS) house 86% of the world’s refugees (UNHCR 2014). Meanwhile, wealthier states in the Global North (GN) resettle less than one percent of all refugees. In 2015, 81,893 of the 20 million refugees worldwide departed to resettlement countries, falling short of the 134,044 refugees the UNHCR submitted for resettlement.

States in the GN leverage their ability to externalize refugee hosting responsibilities to the GS, and in return, become financial donors that provide support for refugees abroad. In 2016, the top donor states were United States (1,493,799,619 USD), the European Union (341,606,227 USD) and Germany (283,888,027 USD). Burden sharing allows some states to contribute with resources and others with absorptive capacity, which can be defined as the “ability” and “willingness” to take in refugees.2 This approach to burden sharing turns refugee into a commodity that is “traded” because hegemonic states take advantage of “structural

1 Haddad, 2008.
2 Jacobsen 1996
inequities constructed and sustained by them [hegemonic states]"⁴ States in the GN use their wealth, power, and influence to contain the migration flows of refugees and place the responsibility of refugee hosting onto the GS.

The division of labor between states is called the "grand compromise."⁵ States in the GS shoulder the “refugee burden,” which refers to the difficulties of changing demographics, porous borders, and the involvement of international institutions— all practices that have been characterized as contributing to the decline of sovereignty. The “grand compromise” acknowledges that refugees pose distinct challenges for states in the GS as compared to the GN. States in the GN strictly protect their sovereign authority by controlling state borders, selecting and screening prospective refugees, and regulating the number of people who may enter their territory. Moreover, states in the GN do not rely on the UNHCR to provide aid and, therefore, do not yield governing authority to an international institution.

The international refugee regime prioritizes the sovereignty of states in the GN at the expense of sovereignty in the GS. In the GS, state borders tend to be significantly more porous, allowing for minimal screening and selection. States on the GS often rely on refugee camp to closely monitor refugees, attenuate security concerns, and separate refugees from the host population to diffuse tensions.⁵ States in the GS invite the UNHCR to contribute to housing, feeding, and providing social services to refugees, which can lead to a decline in the state’s domestic authority. Some authors characterize the UNHCR as a “surrogate state,” whereby the UN has state-like functions through its allocation of rights to refugees with the permission of the host state.⁶

Rhetorical claims to sovereignty abound, especially in the aftermath of the European refugee crisis. States in the GN have invoked their right to self-governance and autonomy as the justification for rejecting migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as well as the involvement of international institutions like the United Nations or European Union. States in the GS also have sovereignty concerns. However, because of the “grand compromise” that is foundational to the international refugee regime, states in the GS must practice sovereignty while hosting large numbers of refugees.

**The Case of Jordan:**

My research focuses on Jordan. Like states in the GN, Jordan has concerns over porous borders and international involvement, both of which are theorized to contribute to the erosion of state sovereignty. Since the inception of the Jordanian state, the country has accepted millions of refugees while maintaining final authority over internal and external affairs of the state. Given the challenges of refugee reception, how does Jordan maintain sovereignty?

In the second half of this essay, I describe one aspect of the practice of Jordanian sovereignty. I argue that officials of the Jordanian state leverage their position within the “grand compromise” to maintain state sovereignty. The practice of Jordanian sovereignty is tied to sovereignty concerns of states in the GN. Jordanian officials leverage Jordan’s role in solving the “refugee problem,” and in the process, increase international aid and optimize refugee hosting.

Jordan is a world leader in refugee hosting. Jordan has continuously earned recognition as one of the UNHCR’s top ten refugee host countries, making the state a central player in the global distribution of refugees. In 2015, Jordan was the top country of UNHCR resettlement operations with 24,374 refugees submitted for resettlement. For over 70 years, Jordan has hosted displaced people from Palestine, Iraq, and Syria, to name the most prominent waves of refugees. While Jordan’s status as a major refugee host state is internationally recognized by state and UN leaders, there are several conflicting estimates about the number of refugees that currently reside, or have resided, in Jordan. Counting and recording populations within a territory has been theorized as an exercise of sovereign authority.⁷ Empirically, states that exercise sovereignty through strict border control, usually in the GN, can often provide the exact number of refugees within their territory.

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⁵ Chimni, 1998 p. 362
⁴ Cuéllar 2006
⁵ Hanafi, 2014.
⁷ For example, see Loveman 2005; Hannah 2009.
By some accounts, Jordan is home to 2.7 million refugees in a population of 7.8 million (Amnesty International). Others estimate that the total population of Jordan is 9.5 million (Jordanian census 2015). According to the UNHCR, approximately 655,500 Syrians refugees are registered with the UN. Governmental estimates are much higher, suggesting that Jordan hosts 1.3 million Syrians. Governmental estimates include Syrian refugees registered with the UN and Syrian immigrants who may have been in Jordan before the start of the Syrian conflict. The disparity in refugee counts between the Jordanian government and NGOs is not new.

During my ethnographic work in Jordan, I heard one high-ranking Jordanian official explain, “We used to exaggerate the numbers with the Iraqis, but we do not do that anymore. We are not exaggerating the Syrian numbers.” In 2007, the Norwegian research institute FAFO found that there were 161,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, while government estimates claimed that there were 750,000 to one million Iraqi refugees. As of January 2017, the UNHCR reports that there are 61,004 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, a count that excludes Iraqis who are not registered with the UN Refugee Agency. The juxtaposition of these numbers brings to light an important challenge that refugee host states face when they rely on international institutions to provide aid. While the UNHCR and other refugee aid organizations are tasked with serving registered refugee populations, the refugee host state must account for both refugee and non-refugee identifying immigrants as well as their own citizens. In Jordan, the refugee burden includes strained schools and hospitals, a perceived decline in standards of living, and fear over water insecurity.

A disagreement over counting refugees also surfaced between Jordan and the UNHCR over the number of Syrian refugees that began to gather at the border in late 2015. Jordanian government spokesperson Mohammed Momani claimed that the UNHCR “exaggerated” when they criticized Jordan for leaving 12,000 Syrians stranded at the border. In February 2016, BBC journalist Lyse Doucet interviewed King Abdullah II about Jordan’s moral responsibility to accept Syrian refugees. Doucet emphasized Jordan’s responsibility to accept refugees while King Abdullah II made claims about Jordanian sovereignty, stressing the failure of the international community to host an adequate number of refugees. Unlike counting the number of refugees inside the Jordanian state, which has been used to justify financial aid requests, the number of refugees at the border jeopardized Jordan’s reputation as a hospitable refugee host state. Through this interview, King Abdullah II describes Jordanian security concerns and relates them to the concerns of states in the G8. He illustrates that Jordan has the capacity to control migration across state borders but reiterates Jordan’s willingness to continue accepting refugees. This interview is framed by the onset of the European refugee crisis and the backlash against refugee reception in Europe, which has strategically situated Jordan to leverage their “local absorption capacity.” King Abdullah II explains:

At this stage, we let them [Syrian refugees] in as they are being vetted. There is pressure from the international community to let them in, but we are saying to everybody, this is a major national security problem for all of us... But again, we throw back to the international community and to those countries that are being very difficult to us, saying at the end of the day, okay, you are saying that there are only 16,000 [refugees at the border]... We've already taken in 1.4 million people. If you are going to take the higher moral ground on this issue, we'll get them all to an airbase and we're more than happy to relocate them to your country... If you want to help the refugee problem, 16,000 refugees to your country, I don't think is that much of a problem.

Doucet responds with a question: “Has anyone taken up your offer?” King Abdullah II replies, “Of course not.” Then, Doucet makes the humanistic point, “Europe is saying to you, we don’t want [sic] more refugees. You are saying you don’t want any more refugees. Where do they go?” King Abdullah II does not back away from Jordan’s role as a refugee host state. He explains, “We will continue to bring them across, in limited numbers. We will continue to look after them on the other side [of the border]. And, we will continue to vet them. So, it’s going to take time because we cannot afford a terrorist incident to be here in our country.” As of July 2016, the number of Syrian refugees at the border rose to approximately 85,000 people. In June

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6 Chatelard 2008.
2016, an ISIS-claimed bomb exploded at the border. King Abdallah II declared, “Jordan will respond with an iron fist against anyone who tries to tamper with its security and borders.” The case of Syrian refugees at the Jordan-Syria border indicates that while Jordan is a major refugee hosting country, the state also has the capacity to control immigration.

The European refugee crisis increased Jordan’s leverage within the international refugee regime as hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers began to unravel the “grand compromise.” One Jordanian official described 2016 as “Jordan’s golden year.” He explained to me that it would be in Jordan’s interest to emphasize the country’s role not only as a “country of first settlement” but also as a “buffer state” like Turkey. Buffer states get their name from serving as an immigration buffer between countries of origin and destination countries. Since the start of the refugee crisis, my respondent clarified, 150,000 Syrians have returned home on their way to Turkey and Europe. While he criticized Turkey’s impolite behavior toward the European Union, he recognized that Turkey has successfully leveraged their refugee hosting capacity to gain greater resources from donor states in the GN.

The definition of sovereignty is nebulous because it encompasses a wide range of closely related phenomena – each of which is acted upon by the sovereign to maintain final authority. For major refugee host states like Jordan, the practice of sovereignty is shaped by the “grand compromise,” which is foundational to the international refugee regime. Jordan leverages the sovereignty concerns of donor states in the GN, specifically their eagerness to contain refugee flows in the GS, in order to increase international aid and optimize refugee hosting.

Rawan Arar is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of California, San Diego and a researcher at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies.

References


Protest and Informal Leadership in Syrian Refugee Camps

Killian Clarke, Princeton University

Refugees are often seen as among the world’s most marginalized and powerless groups. They typically face profound challenges to securing their basic livelihoods and live in states of precarious legal and political limbo, unclear of their rights and unable to formally influence the policies that affect them. Moreover, the conditions of their dispossession generally render them unable to engage in the types of informal political practices that less powerful groups often use to address collective grievances – things like protests, strikes, boycotts, and petitions. For refugees, the structural barriers to mobilization are usually prohibitively high.

But occasionally refugees manage to overcome these barriers, confounding expectations that they will remain passive and quiescent. In this project I compare mobilization patterns among Syrian refugees living in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey in order to make sense of a surprising empirical puzzle. While in Lebanon and Turkey Syrian refugees have staged very few protests, more or less confirming what conventional wisdom and much academic scholarship predicts about refugee mobilization, in Jordan’s Za’atari Camp refugee contention has been frequent and tenacious. What explains this striking variation in patterns of contention across these three countries? How have Za’atari’s refugee communities managed to defy expectations about refugee mobilization? And what have been the effects of these protests on the camp’s structures of governance and patterns of social life?

The mobilization in Za’atari, I argue, was made possible by a unique configuration of space and governance that was absent in Turkey and Lebanon. Specifically, the refugees in Za’atari 1) were concentrated together in large numbers in a confined spatial area and 2) were governed by a poorly coordinated coalition of humanitarian and governmental organizations. These factors gave refugees the capacity to form their own leadership networks and stage protests against camp authorities. And though at first the heightened levels of contention in Za’atari created a chaotic and tense environment, over time the persistent protesting began to yield tangible results: governance structures were redesigned, aid distribution patterns changed, and camp policies were reformed. Indeed, the paradox of the early unrest in Za’atari is that it has produced perhaps one of the most livable places in the Middle East for Syrian refugees.

The research for the project is based on three months of fieldwork in summer 2015, in which I visited refugee camps in all three countries and interviewed 87 individuals, including members of refugee communities, aid agencies, government authorities, and representatives of international organizations. I focused on refugees in camps because camps provide a relatively comparable unit of analysis; they are a similar spatial unit of settlement (though, as I will discuss, there are important differences between informal and formal camps) and camp-based refugees across the three countries tend to come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. I also analyze two datasets of refugee protest events, one from the Za’atari Camp (collected by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency) and one from Lebanon (web-scraped by the Lebanese data consultancy Eqlim).

Jordan’s Za’atari Camp

The Za’atari Camp was opened on July 28, 2012, when the Jordanian government made a unilateral decision to begin settling refugees on a patch of empty land in the north of the country enclosed by a ditch. The population of the camp grew rapidly, eventually reaching 130,000, and the myriad organizations in charge of the camp found it increasingly difficult to manage. Initially Za’atari was run by the Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO), a pseudo-governmental aid organization with

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1 At its peak, Za’atari’s population was approximately 130,000. It has since stabilized to a population of roughly 80,000. All camp population data is available at: http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/
little experience in running refugee camps. It frequently clashed with its UN and international NGO (INGO) partners, who had been tasked with providing specific aid and services. The UN organizations and INGOs took what one UN officer described as an “infrastructural” approach to aid delivery, with a focus on “setting up the apparatuses of service provision,” like facilities, logistics, and orderly processes. In contrast, JHCO preferred to distribute aid more quickly and directly. In general during the camp’s first six months these humanitarian organizations remained in their base camp on the northern perimeter, distributing goods from the main gate. Meanwhile, security was provided by two branches of the Jordanian military that had no experience with policing; they too remained stationed at the periphery of the camp, only entering when there was unrest, which they typically quelled with teargas.

With such a fragmented and removed camp administration, it was not long before leaders within the refugee community began to emerge and establish an informal system of governance. In some cases these leaders had been authority figures in Syria— they were the heads of large families or leaders of villages or clans. But in other cases they built up their power in the camp itself, often by running small businesses or smuggling operations, which allowed them to accumulate resources and access to goods.

Within three months of the camp’s opening these leaders had worked out their own informal system of governance, with each leader overseeing a particular street (giving them the informal name “street leaders”). Above a group of street leaders would sit a district leader, who might have influence among thousands of camp residents. Within their respective regions of authority, street leaders served both as resource brokers and as arbiters of communal disputes.

In parallel with the rise of these informal leaders, Za’atari experienced a marked escalation in contentious events— including protesting, demonstrating, rioting, stone throwing, blocking roads, forcing entry, and occupying buildings. Interviews with camp residents and authorities, as well a review of the meeting minutes at the weekly Camp Management Committee meeting for 2013 and 2014, suggests that these incidents were mostly driven by refugee grievances related to services (like electricity provision, water distribution, or food quality) or by security issues (like regulations regarding entering and leaving the camp). Typically they targeted either the humanitarian organization responsible for providing the relevant service or good, or the Jordanian security forces in charge of policing the camp. Though some of these outburst were spontaneous, interviewees and camp governance reports indicated that much of the contention was organized by street leaders, who used their resources and influence to motivate their followers to make claims against camp authorities, and worked together to protect each other from crackdowns by security forces. Figure 1 charts the contention in the camp from January 2013 to December 2014. Though the data are partial (2012 data were not collected, and data for January through March 2013 are underreported) they point to the high levels of

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2 Author interview, former employee, Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, head of sub-office, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 23 August 2015; author interview, community service officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015; author interview, humanitarian affairs advisor, UN organization, Amman, Jordan, 18 August 2015

3 Author interview, humanitarian affairs advisor, UN organization, Amman, Jordan, 18 August 2015.

4 The organizations frequently undermined each other in methods of aid distribution. For example, on one occasion during the winter a UN organization received a donation of caravans but decided not to distribute them directly to the refugees. JHCO, noting that it was cold, urged the refugees to take the caravans for themselves. Author interview, former employee, Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015.

5 Author interview, team members of private security consultant, Amman, Jordan, 20 August 2015; author interview, former employee, Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, local officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 23 August 2015.

6 Author interview, street leader 1, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, former district leader, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, Women’s Committee of Za’atari residents, Za’atari, Jordan, 19 August, 2015; author interview, community service officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015; author interview, Za’atari camp director, UN organization, Skype, 24 January 2016.

7 Author interview, former employee, Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, head of sub-office, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 23 August 2015; author interview, community service officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015; author interview, humanitarian affairs advisor, UN organization, Amman, Jordan, 18 August 2015.
refugee mobilization during the camp’s early days. Though the data are partial (2012 data were not collected, and data for January through March 2013 are underreported) they point to the high levels of refugee contention during the camp’s early days.

Figure 1: Monthly Contentious Events in Za’atari Camp (2013 and 2014)

In part due to these high levels of unrest, the Jordanians decided to hand centralized management responsibilities of the camp over to UNHCR in March 2013. The new camp director, Kilian Kleinschmidt, chaired his first Camp Management Coordination meeting on March 19, 2013. At this gathering he had the following stern words for his Jordanian and international partners about the need to improve their levels of coordination: “We need to work together, in a spirit of teamwork and partnership, with UNHCR coordinating… It’s important that we have clarity of organization and responsibilities. In principle, all the UNHCR people working in Zaatari report to [me].” One of the primary “action items” listed in these minutes was to “send [the] contact list for street leaders,” so that Kleinschmidt could meet with them later the same week.

Over the course of the next nine months, UNHCR administrators restructured their approach to camp governance, with a strong emphasis on engaging and incorporating the informal leaders who had come to control the camp. Kilian Kleinschmidt began holding regular meetings with street leaders to discuss community grievances; this eventually became the primary forum in which differences between refugees and camp management were negotiated and worked out. In August 2013, a new community police force, trained in community outreach and conflict mediation, began replacing the heavy-handed military troops. Several months later UNHCR and its partners launched a community mobilization program, designed to improve outreach to refugee communities through issue-specific committees. Service provision practices were eventually restructured to better accommodate refugee demands. For example, camp administrators eventually allowed refugees to have their own private bathrooms and water tanks, rather than use the communal facilities that had first been set up, and they built grocery stores, where refugees could select their own food.

At the same time that these changes were being implemented, contention in the camp began to decrease (see Figure 1). The new patterns of interaction between street leaders and camp managers established formal communication channels that hadn’t existed before and many of the most pressing refugee grievances were addressed. Under these new terms, leaders had far fewer reasons to organize protests; they maintained their

8 “CCCM meeting in Za’atri” Draft minutes, “Tuesday 19th March, 14:00 hrs, p.1.
9 Ibid

10 Author interview, community mobilization officer, INGO, Za’atari, Jordan; author interview, street leader 2, Za’atari, Jordan, 25 August 2015; author interview, community service officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015.
11 Author interview, team members of private security consultant, Amman, Jordan, 20 August 2015.
12 Author interview, Za’atari Camp coordinator, INGO, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015; author interview, head of sub-office, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 23 August 2015
13 Author interview, community mobilization officer, INGO, Za’atari, Jordan; author interview, community service officer, UN organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015; author interview, community outreach volunteer, international organization, Za’atari, Jordan, 19 August 2015; author interview, Za’atari Camp coordinator, INGO, Za’atari, Jordan, 24 August 2015.
authority and became UNHCR’s de facto partners in camp governance.16

**Lebanon’s Informal Tented Settlements**

The refugee management system established to manage the 1.1 million Syrians who have fled to Lebanon has differed from Jordan’s system in several important respects. If anything, aid provision has been even more uncoordinated than it ever was in Za’atari, with a patchwork of Lebanese government agencies and local and international NGOs responsible for different regions and sectors.17 But perhaps most important for shaping the organizational capacities of refugee communities has been the Lebanese government’s insistence that no large or formal refugee camps be established.18 Instead, many Syrian refugees in Lebanon have set up small informal settlements on vacant strips of land in rural parts of the country. These settlements are usually quite small (less than 1,000 people) and often several kilometers removed from each other. They are also highly vulnerable to attack and harassment from local police or host populations. Though residents can technically come and go as they please, most residents rarely leave the settlements due to security concerns (Lebanon has myriad checkpoints, and refugees without the proper papers can be arrested and detained). There are few social networks or relationships between residents in different settlements.19

Usually in each camp one resident will come to serve as an informal leader and interlocutor with aid organizations.20 But unlike the street leaders in Za’atari, these informal leaders have not formed their own dense and hierarchical leadership networks; the small size, isolation, and vulnerability of the settlements they live in has proven to be an insurmountable obstacle to building such informal structures. Without these structures they have not been able to mobilize the types of broad followings nor provide the same type of mutual support and protection that facilitated the resistance to Za’atari’s humanitarian authorities.

Although data comparable to the UNHCR event data in Za’atari is not available in Lebanon, the Lebanese consultancy Eqlim has scraped publicly available Internet content to produce a database of geocoded contentious events involving Syrian refugees from 2014 and 2016. These data were supplemented by event data from Lebanon Support’s Conflict Map of conflict-related incidents in Lebanon from June 2014 to January 2017.21 Over this three-year period there have been only 18 incidences of contention in 13 locations across Lebanon.22

We may also learn something from the pattern of where these small numbers of events occurred. Figure 2 maps the location of protests against the location of refugee settlements of over 100 residents. It suggests that protesting by Syrian refugees has tended to emerge in locations that more closely approximate Za’atari’s conditions – i.e., places where greater numbers of refugees

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16 Author interview, team members of private security consultant, Amman, Jordan, 20 August 2015; author interview, Za’atari camp director, UN organization, Skype, 24 January 2016.

17 Author interview, humanitarian affairs officer, UN organization, Beirut, Lebanon, 11 August 2015; author interview, founder, Syrian NGO, Beirut, Lebanon, 3 August 2015; author interview, coordinator, education sector working group, Beirut, Lebanon, 28 July 2015; author interview, founder, Lebanese NGO, Beirut, Lebanon, 22 August 2015; author interview, field coordinator, INGO, Beirut, Lebanon, 23 July 2015.


19 Author interview, informal camp resident, Bekaa, Lebanon, 31 July 2015; author interview, principal, informal camp school, Bekaa, Lebanon, 31 July 2015; author interview, director, local NGO, Bekaa, Lebanon, 31 July 2015; author interview, volunteer, Syrian NGO, Bekaa, Lebanon, 4 August 2015.

20 These leaders are typically referred to as *shawish* and are the closest analogy to the informal leaders in Za’atari. They are typically tribal leaders or the heads of large families, and are often also empowered by aid organizations that use them to distribute food, tents, and other goods to a settlement. Author interview, field coordinator, INGO, Beirut, Lebanon, 23 July 2015; author interview, head of educational development, local NGO, Beirut, Lebanon, 31 July 2015; Author interview, founder, Syrian volunteer group, Beirut, Lebanon, 3 August 2015. For more on the role of shawish see: Muzna al-Masri, “Between Local Patronage Relationships and Securitization: The Conflict Context in the Bekaa Region,” Lebanon Support, January 2015.

21 The map can be accessed at: http://dev.cskc.daleel-madani.org/cma/map

22 These quantitative measures were confirmed by interviewees, who noted that protesting by Syrian refugees in Lebanon is exceedingly rare.
are concentrated together and where governance is weaker. For example, we can see that the most protests emerged in places like Aarsal, Akkar, and Wadi Khaled, where large settlements tend to be clustered close together and both Lebanese and humanitarian authorities have had a limited presence.\(^23\)

The camps were run instead by a government agency, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), with close ties to the central government and significant human and capital resources. This agency established a well-coordinated apparatus of governance in each camp, with one camp director and two vice directors in charge, and a small number of service and security organizations to support.\(^25\) The security presence in the camps was far higher than it had been in Za’atari – for example, in camps of several thousand refugees the Turkish authorities dedicated roughly one hundred security forces, the same number that Za’atari had in early 2013 to manage 100,000 residents.\(^26\)

The governance system established by AFAD allowed it to closely monitor life in its camps, and social space was never ceded to Syrians in the same way that it was in Za’atari.\(^27\) As a result, refugee contention in Turkish camps, like in Lebanon, has been quite minimal.\(^28\) The tight monitoring of life in these camps has prevented autonomous refugee groups from emerging, in turn limiting the ability of refugees to make demands against authorities. On the few occasions when unrest has emerged, the Turkish security forces have cracked down swiftly, often evicting those involved from the camps (or from Turkey entirely).\(^29\) Though AFAD has designated

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\(^{23}\) Aarsal was the zone with the most protests (three total) over this three-year period. In 2015 Aarsal also had the greatest number of Syrian settlements (91 settlements) and the highest population of refugees living in settlements (20,000+). Moreover, Aarsal is isolated and remote, and for a long time it was inaccessible to humanitarian NGOs.

\(^{24}\) Author interview, field officer, UN organization, Kilis, Turkey, 15 June 2015; Author interview, head of education programming, UN organization, Antakya, Turkey, 15 June 2015.

\(^{25}\) Author interview, former coordinator of Hatay camps, Yayladagi, Turkey, 12 June 2015. Author field visit, Kilis Container City, Nizip Tent City, and Nizip Container City, 15 June 2015.


\(^{27}\) Author interview, education programming coordinator, UN organization, Antakya, Turkey, 11 June 2015.

\(^{28}\) Though protest data analogous to the UNHCR incident data in Za’atari or the Eqlim’s web-scraped data for Lebanon is not available for Turkey, the lack of mobilization in the Turkish camps was confirmed both by interviewees and third party researchers. Moreover, a review of Turkish national and local news sources over the three year period from summer 2011 (when the first camp was opened) to 2014 identified only 8 reported instances of Syrian protests or unrest.

\(^{29}\) According to a representative of the Kaymak’s office in Yayladagi, who used to serve as the Hatay governor’s coordinator for the five camps in the governorate, the Turkish authorities had a practice of “exiling troublemakers” who were responsible for unrest. Author interview, former camp coordinator, Hatay governor’s office, Yayladagi, Turkey, 12 June 2015. This practice was also documented by journalists following one of the biggest protests in a Turkish camp, in March 2013.
refugee leaders in each camp district to distribute information and source grievances from their neighbors, these leaders owe their positions to the camp authorities and therefore serve more as tools of demobilization than has agents of refugee mobilization. 30

Conclusion

The contrasting patterns of contention in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey point to some important lessons regarding the conditions under which we are most likely to see mobilization and political organizing among refugees. The concentration of large number of refugees in the Za’atari Camp, combined with the fragmented and uncoordinated administration that first governed it, provided refugees with the space to develop their own autonomous leaders and informal social networks. 31 These informal leadership networks provided a basis for sustained mobilization through the camp’s first year. In Lebanon, the isolation and vulnerability of the informal settlements prevented comparable leadership networks from forming. And in Turkey the well-consolidated system of authority in the camps forestalled the emergence of autonomous, powerful leaders. As a result, Lebanon and Turkey have seen far fewer protests among refugees than Za’atari did. And though the Za’atari protests created chaos and instability at the time, ultimately they brought about a pattern of governance and welfare provision far more responsive and inclusive than those that have emerged elsewhere in the Middle East.

Killian Clarke is a PhD candidate in comparative politics at Princeton University.

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30 Author interview, group manager, AFAD, Skype, 14 September 2015; author interview, resident of Nizip Tent City, Nizip, Turkey, 15 June 2015; author interview, community service volunteer, UN organization, Kilis, Turkey, 15 June 2015.

31 Another explanation for the unusual pattern in Za’atari is that the camp was dominated by refugees from Dera’a. It is possible that something unique about Syrians from Dera’a – either a stronger tendency to protest or more resilient communal structures – explains these refugees’ contentiousness. But the explanation is not born out by sub-national protect variation in Jordan. First refugees in districts without significant numbers of Dera’awis developed the same system of street leaders and exhibited the same levels of protest. And another camp, Azraq, build in 2014 (but with authority dynamics more similar to a Turkish camp) had a similarly large proportion of Dera’awis and experienced very limited contention.
Rethinking Borders: The Case of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

Filippo Dionigi, London School of Economics

Rethinking borders as analytical category

Statehood, sovereignty and therefore borders and territorality have been called into question by the 2011 uprisings that—notwithstanding their domestic causes—have quickly diffused across several Middle Eastern countries. Then, conflicts have fragmented Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq generating a vacuum for non-state actors to assert their presence. Finally, forced migrations have resulted in the displacement of millions within and across state borders; among these the Syrian refugee crisis is the most extensive case.

As a result of these tumultuous phenomena, states and their borders in the Middle East are under a great deal of pressure, yet old regimes have fought back virtually everywhere supported by external regional and global allies.

If we look at the region in early 2017 no major structural change has occurred thus far, but we can hardly look back at the past six years relying on a conventional understanding of states and borders based on Westphalian assumptions. An idea of statehood as self-enclosed national, territorial, and sovereign entity prevents us from understanding trans-border dynamics cutting across domestic, regional and global spheres in both directions: interventions from outside into local realities and the diffusion of domestic phenomena such as social movements, militias, migrations, and economies beyond the borders of their place of origin. The state as an autonomous institutional order and its territorality as a "society container" are constantly challenged by a dense web of relations which is hardly contained by formal borders.

To better explain the nature of these transborder dynamics, this memo proposes a reconceptualization of borders between Syria and Lebanon as "thin" borders by looking at the case of Syrian forced displacement.

Thin borders are characterised by permeability to fluxes of peoples and things, but retain their border status because they maintain a regulative function. A thin border is not an equivalent for absence of border, weak or volatile border, or open border, but refers to regimes of crossings that regulate the flux of people or things through a set of constitutive layers. These layers are defined by Haselsberger as political, cultural, economic, and physical "boundaries" that form the multi-layered nature of the border. Whereas thin borders establish a regime of crossings for people and goods "thick" borders have the effect of disrupting relational geographies by restraining cross-border fluxes.

1 Islamic State, the Kurdish groups, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda etc.
2 Ahram and Lust 2016, Harling and Simon 2015.
3 The main factors of pressure for borders are the Kurdish mobilisation in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, the rise of the Islamic State organisation, the conflict among factions in Libya and the war in Yemen. For all these cases, nevertheless, is still premature to speak of new forms of autonomous territoriality.
4 With the exception of Tunisia, where nevertheless revolutionary change has been slow, partial, and suffered several setbacks.
5 See for example regional interventions in Libya, Yemen Bahrain or the proxy wars in Syria.
6 See for example in this publication the memos of Ali Hamdan, Rana Khoury and Killian Clarke with regard to the diverse modes of social activism among Syrians in neighbouring countries.
7 Mann 1984.
9 This elaboration on the concepts of thin and thick borders partly relies on its theorisation in the disciplinary field of Planning Theory by (Haselsberger 2014).
10 Haselberger uses the terms geopolitical, sociocultural and biophysical instead of those proposed herein, but I rather keep this simpler terms. (Haselsberger 2014)
11 Haselsberger 2014.
The case of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is an opportunity to operationalize the concept of thin border and then discuss the changes in policy that Lebanese authorities have implemented with regard to the Syrian refugee crisis using boundaries as an analytical framework.

**Border thinness between Lebanon and Syria**

Until 2015, the Lebanese-Syrian border has been an example of thin border because all its boundaries -political, economic, cultural, and physical- have been regulated in a way that encourages the flow of people and goods.

In political terms the boundary between these two states has always been very thin. During the Ottoman Empire the contemporary territories of Lebanon and Syria did not exist, and they were instead divided in wilayat that subsequently became closely related as part of the political project of Greater Syria. During the French Mandate, however, two closely related territorial entities were constituted that subsequently became Lebanon and Syria.

The Syrian regime and some of the Lebanese Panarabist factions have challenged the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon since its origins. The 1958 civil unrest that took place in Lebanon was related to clashing views within Lebanon regarding United Arab Republic. Subsequently, the Syrian regime has confronted Lebanon sovereignty for decades with direct military interventions and military occupation since 1976.

In the late nineties and the 2000s, Lebanese nationalism took the form of a widespread anti-Syrian sentiment, which coalesced in the March 14 alliance between Christian and Sunni political groups and eventually obtained the formal withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanese territory in 2005. Yet, Lebanese dissent towards Syria has been offset by political groups such as AMAL, Hezbollah, and the SSNP which maintain close relations with the Syrian regime and see it a as a benevolent actor in Lebanon.

Other indicators of a scarce political demarcation of boundaries include the fact that Syria has opened an embassy in Lebanon for the first time only in 2008, while the physical demarcation of the Lebanese-Syrian border is currently incomplete.

Also the cultural boundary is thin between these two countries, although contested. Common language, shared historical experience (such as colonial past, Israeli occupations, Panarab ideals etc.), and religion, have weaved a social and cultural relationship between these two countries that some consider the sign of a shared identity. Hafez al-Asad used to describe the Lebanese the Syrians as “one people in two states” for example. Yet, these cultural connections have also been challenged especially from the Lebanese end by groups such as those Christian factions which have promoted Lebanon’s cultural particularism, for instance with reference to Lebanon’s Phoenicians heritage or Christian Maronite religious roots. Similarly, the discourse of “Lebanon First” adopted by anti-Syrian Sunni groups especially after 2005 epitomises the will and interest of certain social and cultural milieus of Lebanon to differ from the Syrian context.

Other cultural contacts between Syria and Lebanon contribute to the thinness of the border and include significant portions of territories in which family connections cut across borders especially in the norther region of the Akkar, and also close religious connections between the Shia community of Lebanon and holy places for Shiism in Syria such as the Sayda Zeyneb Shrine in Damascus. Connections like these establish transnational relations challenging a conventional nationalisation of territory.

The Syrian-Lebanese economic boundary is probably the thinnest layer of the border. Between Lebanon and Syria there is an intense economic exchange. Syria has been for decades one of the main recipients of Lebanon’s exports in competition with countries as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq. For example, for the past twenty years exports from Lebanon to Syria have oscillated between 7 to 10 percent of Lebanon total exports making Syria constantly

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present between the top five trade partners of Lebanon. Furthermore, Syria is a key country of transition for the other major destinations of Lebanon exports such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, thus further showing how the Syrian-Lebanese economic boundary is particularly porous.\footnote{Data from the World Bank, World Integrated World Solutions online database, see \url{http://wits.worldbank.org/}}

In addition to this, Lebanon has been the recipient of hundreds of thousands of Syrian labour migrants for decades that constitute among the key resources of the country for the labour intense economic sectors such as constructions and agriculture.\footnote{The number of Syrian workers in Lebanon is debated and fluctuates between 300000 and 600000. Chalcraft 2008.} Sealing Lebanon’s economic relations with Syria is the 1992 Treaty of Brotherhood and Cooperation (United Nations Treaty Series 1992) that Syria imposed on Lebanon allowing for the circulation of goods and people across the border with minimal administrative burdens. By virtue of this bilateral treaty, until 2015, neither visa requirements nor passports were needed for border crossings.

The physical boundary with Syria is mainly characterised by the mountain reliefs of the Anti-Lebanon on the east that has the effect of channelling border activities in five official crossing points the most important of which is Masna’a.\footnote{Masnaa, Mashari’ Al-Qaa, Al-Amani El Aaboudieh El Aarida} The northern border area is less mountainous. Notwithstanding these natural boundaries and the presence of official crossing points, the Lebanese-Syrian border is known also for smuggling and informal crossings.

Thus, all layers constitutive of the Syrian-Lebanese border have been exceptionally loose and have allowed for the flow of Syrians and Lebanese as well as their goods across the border. This leads to the conclusion that the Lebanese-Syrian border is a thin border characterised by a formal and informal regime of open exchange across the border. Some of the political groups especially in Lebanon would prefer a sharper differentiation between the two countries but at least until 2015 a fluid border situation has prevailed over alternative forms of restrictions. Syrian Lebanese border thinness can be contrasted with Lebanon’s border with Israel, which is demarked by a technical fence and is highly militarised on both sides, no crossings are allowed there.

**The dynamics of border thinness during the Syrian crisis**

Given the thinness of the Syrian-Lebanese border, what were the repercussions of the Syrian crisis in terms of border crossings, especially as concerns Syrian refugees?

The political level of boundary analysis presents interesting aspects. The fact that Lebanese political actors have direct stakes in the Syrian conflict has produced direct repercussions on the Lebanese context. Lebanese political actors allied with the Syrian regime, Hezbollah in particular, have intervened in the conflict directly dispatching troops and military support. Al-Mustaqbal, the leading group of the March 14 alliance, voiced criticism towards the Syrian regime and - especially in the early phase of the uprisings - expected the imminent fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon was a useful display for the critics of al-Assad highlighting the repression of the regime against its own people at times in which the Arab public on a regional scale was galvanised by the anti-authoritarian protests taking place across the region. Furthermore, the fact that the greatest majority of Syrians fleeing Lebanon could be identified as Sunni, has consolidated the connection between the al-Mustaqbal movement and Syrian refugees, especially in a context in which sectarianism was becoming a key force of the conflict.

There was no need for the authorities to undertake special measures to allow refugees into Lebanon, because Syrians fleeing their country could cross freely into Lebanon officially and unofficially by virtue of pre-existing border conditions. The only part of the Syrian population that faced restraints or even the prohibition to enter Lebanon were the Palestinians of Syria, who were allowed to enter Lebanon only at a later stage and on condition of settling exclusively in Palestinian camps.
Furthermore, with the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Lebanese politics was beginning to experience a political paralysis including the postponement of general elections for two times, the vacancy of the presidential office from May 2014 to October 2016, and the change of three governments since 2011 intermitted by long phases of transition.

The thinness of cultural boundaries turned out to be an important asset for Lebanese political factions that advocated for an open border policy to frame it into their political discourse. For the Lebanese Sunni groups both religious identity and their anti-regime stance allowed establishing a direct connection with Syrians fleeing into Lebanon. Syrians are considered “brothers” in need protesting against and fleeing from a regime that their Lebanese counterparts equally resent of, and this establishes a responsibility towards them. In 2011, a member of al-Mustaqbal for example declared that:

“It is the responsibility of the government to guarantee for the [Syrian refugees] a safe place and for them to come into Lebanon to their families and neighbours without being attacked by any security or civil party.”

From a different perspective, but with the same effect, both Hezbollah and AMAL have justified openness towards Syrian refugees as “humanitarian responsibility” and reciprocity. Here the framing has not been related to the political nature of the protests in Syria, and instead they cited religious linkages and cultural and political relations associated with the fact that the Lebanese enjoyed Syrians’ protection in times of war and shared a common history of displacement and war especially against Israel and during the Lebanese civil war. Similarly, Hezbollah could frame its cross-border militancy as a duty to protect Shia holy places, subsequently as a way to sustain “resistance” as embodied by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and finally as a necessity to protect Lebanon from the expansion of Salafi militancy embodied by groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State organization.

In a more localised perspective, local communities on the border, for example in the Akkar region of the north but also elsewhere, have framed their reception to refugees in terms of “hospitality” as related to familial connections with Syrians across the border, although this form of hospitality has been also buttressed by the availability of international aid for both refugees and host communities.

From a different perspective, but with the same effect, both Hezbollah and AMAL have justified openness towards Syrian refugees as “humanitarian responsibility” and reciprocity. Here the framing has not been related to the political nature of the protests in Syria, and instead they cited religious linkages and cultural and political relations associated with the fact that the Lebanese enjoyed Syrians’ protection in times of war and shared a common history of displacement and war especially against Israel and during the Lebanese civil war. Similarly, Hezbollah could frame its cross-border militancy as a duty to protect Shia holy places, subsequently as a way to sustain “resistance” as embodied by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and finally as a necessity to protect Lebanon from the expansion of Salafi militancy embodied by groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State organization.

Overall the boundary analysis highlights that— until 2015— Lebanese-Syrian border thinness has remained unchanged and explains the particularly fast and continuous flow of goods and people—including refugees—across the border. The thin political boundary between Lebanon and Syria allowed for the repercussion of the conflict to reverberate directly in the Lebanese political context. The cultural context that cuts across the border of Lebanon and Syria provided most political actors with the opportunity to frame refugee presence in discourses of hospitality and openness towards Syrian refugees. Economic transactions have been unaffected by conflict and the physical boundary is also unchanged.

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16 I am referring here, broadly, to the concept of framing as present in Social Movement Theory applied in this case to mobilization in support of refugee presence. See for example: (Snow et al. 1986)

17 (Anon. 2011)

18 Carpi 2016.

19 Cali et al. 2015.
Changing conflict, changing borders

But the Syrian uprisings turned into a conflict in which not only domestic forces clashed but also regional and global actors intervened. The possibility of a quick transition in power, as expected by many of al-Assad’s critics and feared by his allies, vanished in a couple of years since the beginning of the uprisings.

The possibility of a quick transition in power, as expected by many of al-Assad’s critics and feared by his allies, vanished in a couple of years since the beginning of the uprisings. The changed reality of the conflict, from uprising to protracted conflict, transformed the perception of its possible repercussions within the Lebanese context; this had consequences for Syrian refugees.

The critics of al-Assad’s regime in Lebanon became less interested in tying their political role to the conflict in Syria and assent to the presence of Syrians in Lebanon became less prominent. Syrian refugee presence had begun to extoll a price in political capital also within the political milieu that was acquiescent to their presence, since local administrations were increasingly affected by the demographic pressure. In April 2014, the UNHCR reported the registration of more than a million Syrian refugees, roughly equivalent to one quarter of Lebanon’s autochthonous population. The picture became even more complex in June 2014, when the Syrian regime held presidential elections. In that occasion, tens of thousands of Syrians marched towards the Syrian embassy in Beirut chanting pro-regime slogans in a show of support for the regime. The political forces that antagonise the Syrian government and therefore were keener on sympathising with Syrian refugees were surprised by this display of loyalty to the regime. In a few months, what was initially considered a political asset among anti-regime political leaders in Lebanon turned out to be a more complex reality with unintended consequences.

The changed perception of refugee presence then precipitated a policy change over border regulation. In October 2014, Lebanon’s council of ministers adopted a new policy proposed by the Christian party leaders and endorsed by most political groups. The decision of the council, implemented in January 2015, made more difficult and expensive the renewal of residency permits for refugees present in Lebanon, forcing them into a status of irregularity. The same measure then closed the border to Syrians that intend to flee to Lebanon on the basis of a humanitarian need.

For the first time in decades in Lebanese-Syrian relations a regime of border restriction has been activated. Yet, this measure marked a change in the nature of the Syrian-Lebanese border but not a full closure yet.

For example, Syrians are admitted for reasons of business or trade, if they are sponsored by an employer (kefala), if they own assets in Lebanon such as real estate, or when in possession of travel documents demonstrating that will travel to other destinations outside the country.

The 2015 border policy, then, is not a blanket closure but a filter that modulates entrance to Lebanon following a logic that can be interpreted through the lenses of the multi-layered boundaries constitutive of the border.

The political boundary that, in the previous stage, was thin and connected the Syrian and Lebanese contexts has, at this stage, “thickened” because— disillusioned by the outcome of the uprisings in Syria— the critics of the Syrian regime in Lebanon had fewer interests in projecting their influence on the dynamics of the conflict across the border. Quite the contrary, isolating from it was in their best interest and that of their constituencies now that the demographic pressure has reached a limit and the loyalty of the refugees to the anti-regime camp was not as clear-cut. The only political actor that has remained fully committed to shaping the Syrian conflict is Hezbollah, which -in spite of any border restrictions- has moved freely its troops and armaments across the border. In fact, in 2013, Hezbollah engaged in a fierce battle in the Qalamoun region of Syria on the border with Lebanon with the intent of...
of removing opposing militant groups that could have become an obstacle on the way to Syria.

The cultural boundary witnessed a parallel process, whereby the rhetoric of solidarity, hospitality, brotherhood, and comradeship with Syrian protesters has been progressively outdone by a sense of fatigue and the exacerbation of sectarian dynamics.\(^22\) Indicative in this respect is the rise of phenomena such as the implementation of curfews targeting specifically the mobility of Syrian refugees or the intention to strip Syrians of their status of “displaced” when travelling back and forth from Syria. Political interests and the narrative of hospitality in which it was previously framed misaligned.

In contrast with political and cultural boundaries, the restrictive measures of 2015 did not apply to the economic boundary that was left deliberately thin. Given the economic interdependence between the two states - especially as concerns trade and labour - this is hardly surprising. Yet, the selectiveness of this policy shows how border policy can be modulated differently across its different boundaries: border policies can rarely be captured by simple “open or close” descriptions.

The physical boundary cannot be easily modified unless by building fences, walls or berms or through surveillance devices that effectively modifies the nature of the boundary. The Lebanese government has been progressively reinforcing its surveillance along the border— also thanks to military aid and training from international donors- but the new measures of 2015 have not modified the physical boundary. They produced more severe controls in official border crossings but this has had the effect of encouraging informal crossings.

The result of the 2015 policy change is a disarticulation of the structure of the border from one that was equally thin across all it layers, and receptive of Syrians in general, to a form of border filtering which has rendered crossing difficult for Syrians in humanitarian need. The same policy has rendered difficult the continuation of legal residence for refugees already present in Lebanese territory by making the process of documents renewal more difficult. As a consequence, Syrians were increasingly pushed outside political and cultural boundaries but those who had an economic status could still take advantage of the thinness of the economic boundary.

**Conclusions**

Studying border thinness between Lebanon and Syria is a way of going beyond Westphalian assumptions on the state as a nationally self-enclosed, territorially contained, sovereign entity. It highlights, instead, how borders are means to project power beyond the domestic sphere of sovereignty from both sides. More broadly, this approach could shed light also on the fast and fluid trans-border dynamics that have shaped Middle Eastern politics and society, especially since 2011, striking a balance between the overall dismissal of borders relevance and the adoption of a fully territorialised conception of the state.

The point, nevertheless, is not to make an exceptionalist argument about Middle Eastern statehood and Lebanese or Syrian states in particular; as observed by Wendy Brown and others the international order at large is increasingly post-Westphalian and the proliferation of walls as borders protection is symptomatic of the global waning of state territoriality.\(^23\)

What is unique is the historical and social context -and in particular the colonial experience- that has shaped the development of thin borders between Lebanon and Syria and between other Middle Eastern states. In addition to the brutality of the conflict in Syria, border thinness is one factor explaining the magnitude and rapidity of the Syrian

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\(^{22}\) The possibility of a spill over of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon has materialised in a stream of attacks with a clear sectarian tone that has hit the country in several occasions. Furthermore, a confrontation emerged between a rising Salafist and sectarian movement and militia headed by a Sheikh Ahmad al-‘Asir, which has been subsequently repressed and his leader arrested. These episodes nevertheless remain sporadic and failed to ignite a conflict on a sustained scale.

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\(^{23}\) Brown 2010, 21.
refugee crisis in Lebanon that has become the country with the highest concentration of refugees in the world.

Analysing borders between Lebanon and Syria as constituted by multi-layered political, cultural, economic, and physical boundaries has shown their thinness. Politically, the Syrian events of 2011 and 2012 - given the broader context of a region in turmoil— resounded directly in the Lebanese environment making the thinness of the political boundary most evident. The thinness of the cultural boundary is clear in the process of framing of Syrian presence in Lebanon, it overrides nationalist objections to refugee presence, thus marking a sharp contrast with states (for example in the western hemisphere) where forced displacement has been used to ignite nationalist populism. The intense economic exchange between these two countries has constituted a robust pattern of interdependence that has inhibited restrictions on border crossings, while the physical boundary also facilitated the quick transfer of people and goods.

Yet borders, also when they are thin borders, maintain a regulative function. Thin borders are not a euphemism for weak, open, or redundant borders, and indeed it was observed how in 2015 Lebanon has enacted measures that have changed the dynamics of flow especially with respect to Syrian refugees. The measures can be explained as consequential to a change of perception of the conflict in Syria, which precipitated a new awareness regarding Syrian presence in Lebanon also among those groups that overall were acquiescent to it.

As a consequence, the border has begun to operate as a “filter,” whereby Syrians— especially Syrians that intended to cross into Lebanon for humanitarian reasons— were discriminated against at the border and within the country, whereas those who were already in Lebanon or intended to travel to Lebanon for economic reasons could take advantage of the fact that the economic boundary was kept thin by Lebanese authorities. This has produced a disarticulation of the border from general thinness to different degrees across its different layers.

Refugees— both already in Lebanon and at the border— unable to access the country or to renew their residency permits due to the new measures, have been relegated into a “suspended” extraterritorial space delimited at one end by the restrictions imposed by the 2015 new regulation and by Syrian inhabitability on the other end. The political and cultural thickening of the boundary has isolated Syrian refugees and confined them to what Michel Agier would define a “borderland”: an area where people cannot cross completely the border and therefore becomes a “border dweller.”

The question of borders in the Middle East and elsewhere remains open. Facts as migrations, economy, and transnational connections interrogate the nature of the state, its territoriality and presumed “identity.” In response to this, border thinness, without dismissing their function, reconsiders borders as multi-layered institutions and does not assume the existence of uniform spaces and territories coextensive with the reach of social and political dynamics.

Filippo Dionigi is the Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the London School of Economics.

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24 To be noticed is the fact that the General Security Office in early 2017 has loosened the requirements to renew residency permits for Syrians already registered with UNHCR in Lebanon.

25 Borderlands in Lebanon and elsewhere can be extensive and highly populated for example the condition of Palestinian refugees and that of the tens of thousands of stateless individuals in this country very much resembles this status of suspension in between borders. (Agier 2016, 58)
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By Not Taking Refugees, the U.S. May Make them More Dangerous

Jonah Eaton, Nationalities Service Center; University of Pennsylvania Law School
Adnan Naseemullah, King’s College London

The Trump administration’s executive orders on immigration have targeted refugees as a particular threat to national security, despite a lack of evidence that this is the case. To the contrary, the unwillingness of the U.S. and its European allies to resettle refugees away from the Middle East could present a much greater threat to national and global security over the long term.

The reluctance of the U.S. and Europe to accept asylum seekers and resettle refugees has kept many of those fleeing conflict in Syria in neighboring countries, where they face deteriorating conditions and few prospects. The growing refugee populations place extreme pressure on poor and middle-income countries, increasing the risk of state collapse. Refugees themselves are often targets for militant mobilization and radicalization -- thus expanding the scope of conflict in the Middle East.

Are refugees a danger to the United States?

President Trump has linked refugees, particularly those from Muslim majority countries, with terrorism. Excluding these refugees, he argues, will make the U.S. safer. The March 6th Executive Order on immigration, which is subject to a temporary stay, included a 120-day shutdown of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program.

Further, the White House ordered that the number of resettled refugees, set by the Obama administration at 110,000 for fiscal year 2017, be capped at 50,000. This is the subject of litigation before a federal court in Maryland. However, the Refugee Act of 1980, which created the refugee resettlement program, gives the president broad authority to set the number of refugees the U.S. will accept in a given year, so the program may well be scaled back in the future.

There is little evidence that refugees present a danger, however. Resettled refugees undergo extensive background checks that often take two years or more, and are the most thoroughly vetted of any immigrant group. As a practical matter, the refugee resettlement process would likely be a prohibitively cumbersome mechanism for the infiltration of militants into Western countries. The perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Orlando and San Bernardino were citizens or permanent residents.

There’s a broader threat to global security

There is evidence, however, that national security interests may be threatened if refugee resettlement is halted. The world is in the midst of the largest forced migration since World War II. Without either ending the underlying causes of the migration or increasing the asylum capacity within the international community, most of those seeking refuge from the conflict will remain in countries in the Middle East and Africa.

According to UNHCR, over 3 million refugees, mostly from the Syrian conflict, are now in Turkey, representing nearly five percent of the population. Approximately 10 percent live in massive, ungoverned refugee camps -- potential sources for extremist mobilization and transnational criminal activity, as Sarah Lischer has documented. In southeastern Turkey, where 38 percent of the refugee population is concentrated, opportunities for employment are scarce and violence has increased significantly.

In Jordan, the government has sought to contain refugee inflows from Syria by concentrating tens of thousands of refugees in camps along the border, such as Ruqban and Hadalat. Armed militias have formed in these camps, which have been the target of Russian air strikes.

Lebanon has the world’s highest number of refugees per capita, with an estimated 1.2 million refugees, mostly from Syria, in a country with a population of roughly 4.4 million. While Lebanon officially has a “no camps” policy, 90

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This piece originally appeared in the Monkey Cage at the Washington Post.
percent of these refugees are located in just 251 localities, which are some of Lebanon’s poorest.

There’s a dangerous precedent here -- Afghan refugees in the 1980s and 1990s

The concentration of refugees in the poorest regions of countries in the Middle East echoes the plight of refugees from the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, when over 3 million Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan after the 1979 Soviet invasion. Most of these refugees ended up in camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and present-day province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the most underdeveloped regions in the country. These camps became the primary recruiting ground for some of the most radical and brutal mujahidin militias, particularly Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-i-Islami. The Taliban movement began among Afghan refugees studying in seminaries in northwest Pakistan.

These refugee camps have remained a key recruitment ground for the Taliban and continue to destabilize Pakistan. Many of Pakistan’s problems with internal order, from extremist violence and sectarian conflict to drug trafficking and the proliferation of small arms, have their roots in the lawlessness of these camps. New militant groups have been more recently mobilized within the refugee population. Such disorder helped break down governance arrangements within the country’s tribal agencies. This led to the consolidation of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the group responsible for a nearly decade-long insurgency aimed at destabilizing the Pakistani state.

There are crucial differences between Afghan and Syrian cases, but parallels remain

Unlike Afghan refugees in Pakistan, most Syrian refugees are not restricted to camps. And there is less evidence at present of recruiting and arming militias from among refugees in the region, as was the case with recruitment of the Afghan mujahidin. But the parallels may well grow stronger as the conflict continues.

The lack of employment opportunities and the concentration of refugee populations in the poorest regions of host countries create de facto refugee camp conditions. Syrian refugees in Lebanon are regularly denied work permits, which forces them into the informal economy. These restrictions create potential conditions for expanding the Syrian conflict well beyond its borders.

Populations languishing over years in poor conditions, without access to jobs or education and separated from family and kinship structures, can be ideal targets for radicalization. At present, the U.S. and Europe rely on the stability of countries like Turkey and Lebanon -- but the long-term presence of millions of refugees puts great strains on services and governance in these middle-income countries.

There is a danger that the prolonged stay of 4 million Syrian refugees might weaken the stability of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Algeria and Tunisia -- all countries that have thus far escaped the pressures of state collapse following the Arab Spring.

Barring permanent political settlements, the only solution to the crisis is to move large number of refugees to countries better equipped to absorb them, giving them access to opportunities until the conflict is over. As a matter of simple geography, most asylum applicants make their way to Europe, having plausible, if still very dangerous, land and sea routes into the continent.

In 2016, Norway, Switzerland and E.U. member states saw 1.2 million asylum claims, the vast majority from the Middle East. However, U.S. policy has historically responded to spikes in asylum claims elsewhere by increasing refugee resettlement in America. Whether relocated to Europe or to the United States, both of these modes are critical for alleviating the crisis in the camps, and thus forestalling a much broader conflict spanning the entire Middle East.

Jonah Eaton is staff attorney at the Nationalities Service Center in Philadelphia and guest lecturer in refugee law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

Adnan Naseemullah is lecturer in international relations and South Asia at King’s College London.
Exile and displacement have transformed the Syrian opposition movement to Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Leaving Syria, they are confronted with a fluctuating wartime context and differing host-state policies. These actors have consequently adapted to this landscape in the form of networks with distinct circulations of information, materials, and indeed, bodies that draw together the fates of Syrians inside and outside of the country. Moreover, these circulations sustain a kind of transnational space for Syrian opposition politics to flourish. This paper explores these networks, focusing on those acting from exile in Turkey and Jordan and examines how they are maintained by touching on the routine practices of mobility that support governance in the liberated territories of Syria.

Borders & The Syrian Conflict

For scholars thinking through the geographical dimensions of politics in Syria, the primary spatial heuristic they draw on is territoriality.1 Doing so ties in well to ongoing discussions on the production of political order in wartime, during which contests over territory (in a very tangible sense) feature prominently.2 Territoriality has also acquired new significance for Syria and the region more broadly with the advent of the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS or Daesh) whose distaste for state boundaries manifests in spectacular “border-breaking” performances meant to reassert what is in their view the unbounded sovereignty of God.3 But if this tired conversation oversstates the artificiality of borders in the region – a thankfully demystified elsewhere4 – it nonetheless enjoins us to take territoriality, and borders in particular, as meaningful interventions in politics while acknowledging that they are still mutable and situated achievements. Rather than straightforward reflections of state policy or imported fabrications, the political significance of borders must be inferred empirically from particular histories of interaction, regimes of sovereignty, and discourses of difference, as well as processes endogenous to political violence.5

Looking to Syria, bordering practices are crucial to shaping politics and conflict dynamics at present, but their effects are contingent on a number of factors. There is considerable variation in implementation along the length of even the same border. States may well pursue enforcement policies that differentiate access along different sections of the border, as Turkey does in regions abutting the Kurdish cantons of northern Syria.

States and borderland communities are not alone in negotiating how borders intervene in politics; they are conditioned by international actors, whose activities may further shape the unfolding of bordering practices. Consequently, to consider how opposition networks do or do not reach into Syria means paying attention to the locally-specific politics through which borders, and thus access to Syria, are produced.

The Lebanese border has long been shaped by the country’s “special relationship” with Syria.6 Officially, this derives from formal arrangements between the Lebanese and Syrian states, but is more a complex entanglement among the elite and political classes of both countries, intelligence-sharing, a robust military presence and, after withdrawal in 2005, an alliance of ever-growing convenience with the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah. Syrian dissidents found a sympathetic audience in many Lebanese circles from their social ties— bolstered by the regular flow of labor, goods, and information. When Syria’s uprising began in 2011, the Lebanese border unsurprisingly became an early conduit for medical supplies, mobile telecommunications technology, weapons, and to a lesser extent, militants to support the initial resistance to the Assad regime’s early show of force. But just as easily, the border became a conduit for support to the regime; in 2013 Hezbollah intervened across the border to prevent rebels from controlling the strategic town of Qusayr. What followed was the “hardening” of Lebanon’s border through a process of extended sieges in opposition
communities, accompanied by a parallel “softening” for pro-regime elements from Lebanon and international humanitarian staff based in Damascus. Ongoing sieges on the border continue to show the strategic significance of borders in Lebanon to both parties of Syria’s conflict.

Even among states supporting the opposition, border dynamics are hardly predictable, though they have followed general patterns of guarded access. An initial, but essential, event that shaped opposition access occurred in the summer of 2014 when the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2165, pushing for the transfer of humanitarian aid to the country via four crossings in Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. This facilitated the consolidation of humanitarian, development, and political activities in Turkish and Jordanian cities safely removed across the border but adjacent to opposition-held territory in Syria. No Lebanese crossings were included. As one Western aid worker asserts, the resolution represented “a slap in the face to Syrian sovereignty.” Perhaps more realistically, it muddles the regime’s early efforts to isolate rebel-held territories. The UN hardly dictates events on the ground in Syria; at the same time, their intervention has redirected the conversation on borders from a discourse of state sovereignty to one of international responsibility to stem violence. An increasing body of writing acknowledges that their involvement has altered border access and, through it, the dynamics of the conflict.

There is of course something paradoxical to these developments. In both scenarios, great pains are taken to trumpet protecting the territorial integrity of Syria— even as this is routinely “violated” by state, international, and Syrian actors on either side of the conflict. To understand the agents of these transgressions, and their significance to the conflict, we must shift to other heuristics for investigating the wartime political geographies of Syria.

An Embedded Network

The sequence of UN resolutions ensured a dramatic escalation of aid into opposition territories inside, but also allowed participation in Syrian from a distance. Aid was channeled through specific sites deemed to offer the resources and access necessary to supporting healthcare, food, and more ambitious efforts being planned. It largely centered on and coordinated from Gaziantep in Turkey and Amman in Jordan. In these places, an emergent ecology of humanitarian actors, diplomats, and international contractors— along with the pressing nature of the response— generated demand for information and program implementers.

As a result, a cross-border coordinating class of displaced Syrians coalesced in these cities around the project of supporting participatory governance in opposition territories. This class draws its autonomy from particular forms of expertise (social networks, relations with armed factions and local councils, day-to-day military developments, needs assessments), professional competencies (grant writing, project management, English proficiency, translation, legal training, accounting), and opposition credentials forged before or during the Syrian uprising. Thus, it constitutes a distinctive set of what Thomas Pierret calls “cause entrepreneurs,” whose narrative of revolutionary political change stabilizes the broader cleavages of the Syrian conflict.

These actors are essential to providing services and governance in communities where both had been cut by the Assad regime after withdrawal. This they do by maintaining routinized relations with a panoply of organizations active inside, from civil society organizations (CSOs), to the Free Syrian Police, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), armed factions, but above all with local councils. These experimental governance bodies attempt to provide municipal services, organize peaceful transitions to civilian governance in recently liberated areas, and integrate local figures into the process. They are most successful at infrastructural projects like road repair, trash disposal, and minor health campaigns like vaccine distribution, but also engage in other services. In the absence of an institutional umbrella and given the persistence of regime bombardment from the skies, these routine relations provide a crucial dose of order and stability while pushing
for a more participatory approach to politics in line with the uprising of 2011.

Reach & Mobility

To maintain these overlapping opposition networks and relationships, actors involved must engage in performances of “reach.” These manifest through routinized practices of mobility that are shaped by territorial borders. These efforts create a shared geography of practice and information that sustains the opposition writ large. Importantly, the risk of “conflict contagion” has not stopped neighbor-states like Turkey and Jordan from facilitating the mobility of these actors across borders. Indeed, despite increasingly stringent security measures along their borders with Syria, both countries have created mechanisms to ensure the movements of actors crucial to governance and armed struggle in the liberated territories. In what follows I describe what these mobilities look like.

Reporting

One key way in which these exiled Syrians “reach” into the liberated territories is through the packaging and circulation of information. In the case of Syria, the fragmented nature of space amid conflict fosters distrust, uncertainty and consequently hinders the provision of external support. An array of Syrian consultancies and media offices now carefully monitor local dynamics. Drawing on pre-war social networks and field officers spread throughout the country, they relay “atmospherics” on armed clashes, infrastructure, human rights abuses, commodity prices, and humanitarian needs to headquarters typically (though not always) based in Amman and Gaziantep. Personal, embodied experience and familiarity with daily events in Syria is essential to their credibility. Even in Amman, where authorities are far more guarded and Syrians barely possess the right to work, a U.S. State Department-funded program trains young Syrian journalists to cultivate networks of informants inside Syria, whose updates on conflict dynamics (rather than human-interests stories) are then translated into English by American students of Arabic.

The kind of information set in motion by these actors is made available either online via websites or to bidding organizations in the form of reports and surveys, but it also circulates freely among Syrians in social settings, reinforcing trust among organizations and sorting truth from rumor. As a result, it ensures the movement of funds (via pay to field officers) and the implementation of development projects in communities isolated by war, in turn reproducing the conditions for actors outside the country to continue to engage in a meaningful way.

Trainings

Another, more embodied practice of mobility is the circulation of governance officials and service providers (often civil society organizations or CSOs) from Syria and toward the exile hubs mentioned above. This manifests in the implementation of trainings and workshops that were for a long time weekly to-dos in Gaziantep and Antakya. These events brought media officers, citizen-journalists, trainers, translators, civil defense trainees, policemen, judges, lawyers, and women’s groups into Gaziantep—the goal of which was primarily capacity-building among local councils, in the sense of routinizing governance practices and social relations in the liberated areas. The benefits of training are compounded by the profoundly social dimension of such visits, which strengthen pre-existing networks and foster new ones rooted in the revolutionary atmosphere of exile. After work, councilors relax amid largely male evening gatherings. Trainings thus strengthen the capacities of opposition organizations inside, tie them closely to sources of support outside, and thus add the further transfer of financial resources and infrastructure into crippled local economies.

Field Visits

After Turkey and Jordan both imposed stricter border regimes, opposition actors shifted to remote trainings and extensive field visits. Looking more closely at Turkey, all registered Syrian organizations may offer five employees for vetting at specific border crossings, after which point they are approved for crossing into Syria for periods
averaging a month. The program director of Syrian consultancy firm the East Mediterranean Institute, for example, spends 3-6 months per year inside Syria. For him, these regular field visits form the backbone of EMI’s work: “In the areas we’ve most succeeded in, normal people – our project beneficiaries – have noticed a precision in the work we do, and a clear benefit... We’re always in touch with them. What their concerns are, their problems... because if I don’t know these [things] I can’t really help them. For the local councils, I can’t [directly] offer that kind of help.”

By intervening routinely in these communities, Syrian actors in exile reach into Syria in a very direct way, becoming key intercessors relaying the concerns of local actors to those at great distance from them. This broadens the opportunity horizons of isolated communities in wartime Syria by offering new resources and skills. They also lend a degree of coherence to the opposition’s political agenda by tying their concerns into a broader narrative of participatory governance, and thus a movement for political change. These two dimensions of opposition mobilities cannot be understood in isolation from one another.

An Emergent Opposition Space

In spite of the territorial impositions of state borders, and in many ways thanks to them, opposition networks have found a way into Syria. These networks, and how they move across the border, not only support opposition governance inside the country— they constitute an emergent space of transnational opposition politics. This space links Syrian actors on both sides of the border to the larger goals of the Syrian uprising; namely, the removal of Bashar al-Assad and a turn toward participatory governance. There are of course frictions involved in this process. But for now it is worth emphasizing that there are other ways for conceiving the geography of “wartime political orders” beyond the narrow intellectual space afforded by borders and territoriality. Taking the networked, transnational character of opposition actors seriously, and their role in conflict dynamics, broadens our understanding of the “organizational and social context” of opposition groups in wartime. Importantly, it also illustrates that the geographies of conflict are a constant work in progress.21

Ali Hamdan is a PhD candidate in the department of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles.

(Endnotes)

1 Stuart Elden, “Land, Terrain, Territory.” Progress in Human Geography 34 (6), 799-817.


Resolution 2165 specifies that “the United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners are authorized to use routes across conflict lines and the border crossings of Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa (Turkey), Al Yarubiyah (Iraq) and Al-Ramtha (Jordan), in addition to those already in use.” United Nations Security Council Resolution 2165, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7216th Meeting, on July 14, 2014. Ramtha-Daraa (Jordan), Al Yarubiyah (Iraq), and Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa (Turkey)


Importantly, the Syrian Interim Government is conceived of as the “implementing body” of the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (al-Itilaf).


Indeed, their support likely represents a reverse gamble that such efforts actually increase stability on the Syrian side of the border and thus decrease the risk of the conflict entering into Turkey or Jordan.


Fieldnotes, Gaziantep. October 9, 2016.

And indeed, many Syrian activists adopt a rightfully cynical take on the “atmosphere of organizations” (jaww al-munazzamat).


Staniland, “Wartime Political Orders.”

In the wake of multiple interstate conflicts through the 1990s, analysts came to associate refugees with violence and the spread of civil wars. Yet in six years of massive displacement from Syria, violence among refugees has been conspicuous in its absence. Indeed, case studies of refugee communities worldwide have indicated that refugees often engage in another form of politics: activism—non-routine and nonviolent action carried out on behalf of a cause (Martin 2007). Forms of refugees’ activism may include civic organizing and advocacy, humanitarian relief, and political institution building, among other engagements—activities that impact communities on both sides of the border of a civil war state.

Few quantitative studies capture this nonviolent form of political behavior, if any at the micro level—with good reason: activists typify a “hard-to-survey” population (Tourangeau 2014). Syrian activists in Jordan are hard to survey because there is no sampling frame of their population, their behavior is often informal and sometimes risky, and they are part of a displaced (mobile) population. Thus, to survey activist refugees in Jordan, I used a sampling and analysis method called respondent-driven sampling (RDS).

RDS has been specifically developed for the study of “hidden” populations in a manner that approximates probability sampling. A network-based sampling method, sampling begins with the non-random selection of “seeds,” who recruit a limited number of their peers to participate, and the process repeats with each new wave of recruits, who are linked to each other through unique identification numbers. Assessments of respondents’ social network size generate an estimate for their inclusion probability, used as a weight in the statistical analysis and allowing for population inference with estimates of uncertainty.

Combining RDS with qualitative methods has allowed me to follow the trajectories of activism among Syrian refugees in Jordan. From 2014 to 2016, dozens of interviews with activists created trust and in-depth understanding of their (often sensitive) trajectories; it also enabled the identification of activism as a behavioral characteristic and the networked nature of activists’ social lives. My unique phone-based survey, conducted in 2016, gathered systematic information from a broader swathe than basic snowballing techniques might have achieved, ultimately reaching 176 activists in Amman who self-identified as having engaged in political, social, or economic activism (nashāt) on behalf of the Syrian cause (min ajli al-qadiya as-sūrīya). Figure 1 illustrates the recruitment process.

Figure 1: Beginning with five active seeds, sampling reached as many as twenty-one waves to achieve a sample size of 176 eligible and consenting participants (that is, 18 years or older, of Syrian origin living or working in Amman Governorate, had not previously engaged in the survey, and had engaged in activism on behalf of the Syrian cause since coming to Jordan).

1 This research was generously supported by the Council of American Overseas Research Centers and the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

Tracing Activism’s Trajectory

Syrian displacement to Jordan began in late 2011 and increased dramatically in 2013 as the Syrian conflict became characterized by brutal struggles for territorial control by state and non-state actors increasingly penetrated by direct and indirect military intervention. The Jordanian government worked with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), states, and numerous intergovernmental and international and local non-governmental organizations to respond to the humanitarian crisis. From the beginning, displaced Syrians in Jordan have engaged in activism on behalf of the Syrian cause to impact conditions on both sides of the border.

Who are they?

Syrian activists are generally a young and well-educated population. Inferring from my survey, over 70 percent of those in Amman are between the ages of 18 and 30 [95% CI: 48, 95], and two-thirds are men [54, 79]. Nearly 95 percent have completed at least a secondary education, and nearly half have completed tertiary education. An overwhelming majority identified with the middle class when they lived in Syria [77, 94]; none identified as lower class.\(^4\) My qualitative research suggests that activists in Irbid Governorate, home to the second largest Syrian refugee population after Amman, share these characteristics with their capital-based counterparts.

Where are they (from)?

The activist population in Amman hails from across Syria, with the greatest concentrations coming from Dar’a Province (bordering Jordan) and Syria’s most populated provinces. Syrians are also engaged in activism across Jordan, perhaps especially in the urban areas where the vast majority of Syrians are settled. The camp population has engaged in contentious activity (see Killian Clarke in this collection); yet the structures of encampment likely mark off activism from its urban manifestations and the camps are, in any case, not in the purview of this study.

Prior to the Syrian uprising that began in 2011, only 20 percent of activist refugees had engaged in any form of activism [11, 31]. After the uprising began, nearly half of them did so [36, 58] before fleeing to Jordan. The scope of their activism since arriving has been wide, both in terms of type of activity and its target. The following are a selection of descriptions of each type of activism survey participants have been most recently and primarily engaged in:

- Humanitarian Relief: “Finding and evaluating humanitarian cases, and putting them in touch with the appropriate parties that can provide assistance”

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\(^4\) Over 90 percent of Syrian refugees living outside of the camps in Jordan live below the poverty line (3RP 2016).
• Advocacy: “I’m training in international law, regimes, governance, and leadership empowerment; we intend to work in institutions for civil awareness”

• Development: “Working with adolescents, and serving on psychological counseling and empowerment projects for Jordanians and Syrians”

• Media or Documentation: “I produce programs on the air that treat issues inside and outside of Syria”

• Fundraising: “At the beginning of winter, we raise money from people for others in need and we purchase heaters and winter clothes for them”

• Political Institution Building: “We support the local councils [opposition councils inside Syria] with projects and workshops”

• Political Party Activities: “I am a member of the political office and head of media and communications; we support a political resolution to the conflict in Syria”

• Other: “I write poems about the suffering of the Syrian people and their martyrs. I publish it on Facebook and elsewhere; one poem received an award and was published in a book”

are primarily in the refugee host state, including other activists, NGOs, diplomats, and members of the host community. Three-quarters of activists are engaging on a volunteer basis [64, 86], reflecting legal constraints on refugees’ employment and the non-conventional nature of activism; displaced people are generally excluded from formal institutional channels, and yet they practice agency. Over 80 percent work with other Syrian activists [72, 93], who are mostly also in Jordan [51, 76], but over one-third of whom are in both Jordan and Syria or only in Syria.

What don’t they do (anymore)?

The nature of activism among Syrians in Jordan has not been constant. As the violence in Syria has worsened, and the international humanitarian response in Jordan has swelled, I contend that activism has transformed from a grassroots response to an uprising into an aid-based response to a humanitarian crisis. This adaptation does not necessarily map onto the trajectory of each individual activist, but rather suggests a general process whereby activism is increasingly constricted to humanitarian endeavors. This trend is evident among the survey population.

Over the course of their years in Jordan, Syrians have been engaged in more varied forms of activism than they were at the time of the survey in late 2016. Past activism included more participation in political work, including political institution building (usually of opposition governance bodies), advocacy, and protests (in which none are involved anymore). Fundraising—a grassroots effort—also loses ground in a formal and expansive organizational landscape. In its most recent iteration, humanitarianism, development, and media account for fully 80% of activism.

Figure 4: Form of activism most recently engaged in

Unlike large social movements, activism does not hinge on mass participation. Nor is it understood here to include “one-off” events such as signing a petition. Rather, activism involves a moderate level of cooperation with actors who

5 Qualitative interviews suggest that volunteerism is not necessarily unpaid. Activists sometimes receive forms of compensation such as generous travel stipends.

6 Hovil and Lomo, 2015.
The survey also indicated that nearly 60 percent of participants believe that the number of activists in Jordan has been decreasing over the last few years [49, 70]. It is not intuitive that the number of activists would decrease even as the general refugee population increases. One clue to this puzzle is that those activists engaged in explicitly political work were unanimous in the perception that the number of activists has been decreasing. This view was corroborated to saturation in qualitative interviews; political activists explained that people were leaving Jordan: some migrated overseas, some went to Turkey where they perceived more space for political activism, and others still returned to Syria to engage in activism after the “liberation” of territory by rebels.

Implications

Syrian activists are hopeful about their impact: more than 96 percent believe their work to be at least somewhat effective among its target population. If displaced Syrians are practicing agency and mobilizing during the crisis, and acquiring the skills to rebuild in the future, we have reason to be hopeful too. But we might also consider the consequences of activism’s transformation from the grassroots to an aid-based or even aid-dependent component of “new humanitarianism,” that is, humanitarianism that goes beyond emergency relief to include conflict resolution, reconstruction, and transformations in social processes.\(^7\)

In peacetime contexts, aid and “NGOization” can tame and professionalize political activism.\(^8\) Indeed, creating technocrats to solve technical problems may be altogether “antipolitical.”\(^9\) Already, the Syrian conflict is characterized by very little (productive) political or diplomatic intervention, but abundant military and humanitarian intervention. In this context—and perhaps because of it—activists are not fomenting mass mobilization to dismantle and humanitarianization. In 2014, activists in Irbid, for instance, saw their medical clinic serving “martyrs” (rebels wounded in battle) closed by the Jordanian authorities. Yet around the same time Medecins Sans Frontieres, an INGO, was expanding its operations in Irbid to serve Syrian refugees. To date, more than sixty IOs and I/NGOs have become partners with the UN in its Refugee and Resilience Response Plan (3RP 2016) in Jordan. Many of these partners are the organizations that two-thirds of Amman’s activists are collaborating with [54, 78], while just one-third are working informally with friends or by themselves. External sponsorship for media organizations is apparently also abundant, helping explain the prevalence of media activism and the sense among many activists in Amman that “everybody is a journalist now.”

\(^7\) Duffield 2001.
power structures; rather, they are responding to the war as a humanitarian crisis. Noble as this work is, it may also be testimony to the tragedy of the Syrian uprising.

Rana B. Khoury is a PhD candidate in political science at Northwestern University.

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Beyond Ethno-sectarian ‘Cleansing’:
The Assortative Logic of Forced Displacement in Syria

By Adam G. Lichtenheld, University of California, Berkeley

The Syrian war serves as a stark reminder that population displacement is not simply a consequence of armed conflict; it is integral to the strategies, tactics, and practices of combatants. According to the United Nations and other observers, the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its allies have embarked on a deliberate campaign to uproot civilians through punishing airstrikes, the targeted shelling of civilian infrastructure, besiegement, and forced evacuations. Yet as in other cases where forced displacement has been used as a weapon, in Syria such measures have been largely characterized as ethno-sectarian “cleansing” and attributed to sectarian motivations. This does not adequately capture how civilian flight fits into the logic of violence in the conflict. Unraveling these dynamics is key to better understanding the mechanisms linking wartime violence and displacement, which are often assumed rather than interrogated.

In this memo, I outline a working theory of how armed groups use displacement as a mechanism for sorting and capturing the civilian population. Triggering displacement makes people “vote with their feet” and send costly and highly visible signals of allegiance or obedience based on whether – and to where – they flee. Moreover, it renders those who relocate within an armed group’s purview “legible,” enabling political and military actors to extract intelligence, economic rents, and recruits from a larger segment of the populace, while signaling legitimacy to domestic and international audiences. I provide empirical examples from Syria, drawing from media reports, human rights records, and interviews with activists, journalists, and combatants. While the conflict has unleashed a massive number of refugees, as is typical of civil wars, far more civilians have been uprooted within Syria as internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is important for understanding displacement’s strategic and tactical benefits. I conclude by discussing the implications of this research, which point to the risk of “moral hazard” and the strategic imperatives of IDP protection and asylum.

Existing Explanations

The literature on ethnic cleansing suggests that political actors displace civilians to remove “undesirable” social groups and create homogenous territories. I build on recent research in counterinsurgency, which argues that orchestrating forced displacement is a strategic response to information problems. Winning civil wars hinges on the support of the local population. Armed groups therefore seek to reward collaboration and deter defection, which requires distinguishing combatants from noncombatants and gathering information about civilian loyalties – a particular challenge for counterinsurgents, since rebels tend to adopt guerilla tactics.

Previous studies have therefore argued that when counterinsurgents are unable to resolve information problems, they resort to depopulation to remove potential insurgent supporters. Yet, like theories of ethnic cleansing, this fails to account for the specificity of displacement: why not kill civilians, instead of uprooting them, to “drain the sea” or cleanse a territory? Moreover, these theories imply that armed actors have determined ex ante who is an combatant and who is a civilian, or who is “desirable” and “undesirable.” I argue that displacement is attractive because it offers a way to make these distinctions ex post. In other words, combatants uproot civilians not only to expel “undesirable” populations, but also to identify the undesirables in the first place. This improves the accessibility and “legibility” of the local population, offering both extractive and propaganda benefits. I explain each component of my theory below.

‘Sorting’ and the Signaling Effects of Wartime Displacement

Various studies indicate that people’s decisions to flee in the midst of violence are a function of both incentives – such as security or livelihoods – and preferences.
creating overwhelming incentives to flee, armed groups can use displacement patterns to draw inferences about civilian identities and preferences. Whether people flee, and where they go, can provide costly (and thus credible) and easily observable signals of affiliation and allegiance.13

Once uprooted, civilians are forced in essence to “pick a side” by settling in one group’s territory or physically “defecting” to its opponent. This is where being an IDP and remaining in the country (and thus, the battlefield) versus exiting as a refugee becomes particularly consequential.

To be clear: I am not claiming that people’s movements actually reflect their preferences. I am focusing instead on how these movements are interpreted by others. For combatants and authorities looking for informational shortcuts, these processes provide an efficient and highly visible, if crude, means of sorting the population. This logic can explain why in many 20th century conflicts, “civilians who did not flee combat areas were considered suspect and often killed by warring parties.”14

When the Islamic State seized parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014, many IDPs who fled immediately were accepted by authorities in areas where they sought sanctuary. But those who remained in Islamic State territory and fled later have been denied access to both regime- and rebel-held Syria,15 and to government and Kurdish parts of Iraq,16 on suspicion of being potential collaborators. After Falluja was liberated from the Islamic State last year, the first civilians allowed to return were those who fled the city immediately in 2014.17

‘Capturing’ the Population

Displacement therefore enables political actors to sort the population based on loyalty, through both the process of displacement itself and by allowing for population capture. The relocation of IDPs within an armed group’s purview provides propaganda fodder (by cultivating images of sanctuary) while rendering new arrivals more accessible and “legible.” This offers an opportunity to further screen IDPs for opposition ties, persuade them to join the cause, and gather intelligence from them on the capabilities and operations of rival factions. Moreover, the idleness and uncertainty that displacement engenders facilitates civilian recruitment into a group’s military ranks and labor pool, serving its extractive needs. Under this logic, displacement is therefore a response to information and resource problems. By acting as a force multiplier, it can serve not only to demobilize civilians – as is commonly assumed – but also to mobilize them.

Ethnic cleansing theories have empirical implications regarding the target of displacement (specific identity groups), the form it should take (expulsion) and the results (ethno-sectarian homogenization). My theory suggests that targeting should be more indiscriminate, civilians should be treated differently based on their movements, not just their identities; and a level of social heterogeneity should be maintained. Finally, perpetrators should not only create push factors to drive people out; they should also use pull factors to bring people to their territories.

Evidence from Syria

In Syria, some displacement caused by direct or “face-to-face” violence18 appears consistent with ethno-sectarian cleansing. This includes the depopulation of Sunni coastal enclaves in 2011 and 2012 and the razing of non-Alawite neighborhoods in Damascus.19 Syrian Kurdish forces have evicted Arabs from territories seized from the Islamic State,20 which has itself systematically expelled minorities. But broader dynamics challenge the notion that displacement has been intended solely, or even primarily, to achieve demographic change.

The bulk of displacement during the conflict has been triggered by the regime’s use of indirect violence, such as barrel bombs and airstrikes, which has been widespread and often indiscriminate. Syrian and Russian air forces have hit a range of rebel-held locations beyond the most contested or vital strongholds, including many “where there were no reported clashes that day, suggesting that the airstrikes were not in tactical support of Syrian Army units fighting rebels.”21 Even places considered less strategic for the regime – such as the Hama countryside or eastern provinces like Deir ez-Zor – have not been immune from attack.

The fact that rebel-held areas are overwhelmingly Sunni is often used as evidence that forcing the population to
flee through these tactics amounts to sectarian cleansing by Assad’s Alawite-dominated regime. But most IDPs from opposition territories have fled to government zones. Early in the conflict, many were welcomed and even “considered regime supporters.” These included Sunnis, who remain the majority in areas controlled by the regime and fixtures of the country’s economy and security apparatus. According to one regime defector, “the government views all IDPs who choose to live in opposition areas as anti-regime, and those who choose to live in its territory as loyal.” Assad himself voiced this sentiment in a BBC interview: “In most areas where the rebels took over, the civilians fled and came to our areas, so in most of the areas that we encircle and attack [there] are only militants.”

As the war has worn on, IDPs who spent longer living under the opposition have been viewed with greater suspicion and investigated when they “defect” to regime territory. Some have even been turned away. But as part of evacuations that followed brutal government sieges in Daraya, Moadamiya, Zabadani, Homs and most recently, Aleppo City, most residents were still given a choice of destination: rebel-held Idlib Province, or regime-controlled areas nearby. According to reports and interviews with activists and fighters, people who elected regime areas have been held in government shelters, where they are screened for rebel ties and provided aid by humanitarian agencies or the Russian military. Some are arrested and others forcibly recruited into the armed forces. Those who pass background checks and sign loyalty oaths are permitted to go home. Thus far in Homs, for example, the only IDPs reportedly allowed to return have been those who fled to regime areas. Evacuating to Idlib, meanwhile, amounts to an act of defiance or, for those wanted by the regime, an admission of guilt. It also concentrates disloyalists in a specific area where they can be easily targeted: as explained by the defector, “think of a dumpster where you gather garbage to finally burn it.”

The strategic benefits of uprooting civilians therefore goes beyond draining restive towns of its residents. Were expulsion the ultimate objective of the Syrian government, its approach to IDPs would look similar to the Syrian Kurds: it would refuse to accept them. But the regime has employed several methods to entice people to its territories, where many residents have benefitted from its patronage. The Syrian army has inundated civilians in Homs, Aleppo, and other contested areas with text messages announcing relief distributions and leaflets providing detailed instructions and “passes” for entry into regime territory. The Syrian state has operated collective relief centers and ensured that a disproportionate amount of international aid goes to areas it controls, since food availability has been a key attraction for IDPs. Civil servants living under the opposition have continued to receive government paychecks, which often requires traveling to regime areas. IDPs also provide the regime with propaganda fodder. Visits to IDP shelters by state officials, including Assad, have been used to showcase the number of people seeking sanctuary from “terrorism” and receiving assistance from the government, an attempt to legitimize the regime to both domestic and international audiences.

Some of these dynamics are not surprising, but luring people back to the state stems from extractive needs, not just punitive ones. Subjecting IDPs to background checks and interrogation helps the regime gather intelligence on the locations, tactics, and capabilities of the opposition. Its forces have conscripted male IDPs to serve as fighters or spies. Civilians displaced to the coastal provinces of Tartus and Latakia have offered capital and labor to the local economy, leading the government to facilitate the entry of IDPs from Aleppo into the labor market. The Peace Research Institute in Oslo further describes how the regime benefits from IDPs:

“In areas under its control, the regime’s administrative apparatus – while weakened – retains its capacity to register the displaced…Assad’s regime clearly sees those displaced to areas under its control as part of the pool of people from which it can recruit. The displaced…are more dependent on humanitarian aid than anybody, and clearly, receiving aid is followed by an expectation to support the cause….”
Fleeing to government areas may be motivated by expediency and survival more than political preference. But it still amounts to a symbolic act of obedience to a regime that built its authority on outward signs of passive compliance from citizens instead of by cultivating “true believers”; what Lisa Wedeen calls the politics of “as if.”

Implications

Since coverage of the Syrian conflict is limited and not without bias, the evidence presented above should be met with skepticism. But it suggests that the regime’s displacement tactics (1) are motivated more by political concerns over loyalty than demographic concerns regarding sect, and (2) are consistent with a campaign to sort, capture, and convert the civilian population into compliant, useful assets – not just to expel it. This is not intended to overlook the war’s sectarian dynamics or how foreign militias have exploited displacement by moving their families into depopulated neighborhood. But displacement has served a broader function in Syria than demographic change.

The assortative logic of uprooting civilians can enhance our understanding of how population displacement is instrumentalized in civil wars, and offers a plausible mechanism for explaining the use of indiscriminate violence more broadly. But two questions linger. First, while I have sketched out ways to identify when these logics are at play, they are not inevitable and do not explain every case. So under what conditions do they emerge? Likely when state actors – which tend to face informational disadvantages and countrywide force commitments – become overstretched and unable to detect civilian loyalties through other means. In Syria, it appears that only when the regime began to confront multiple battlefronts, a lack of manpower, and the deterioration of a once-robust intelligence network (the mukhabarat), did it begin to orchestrate civilian flight as a way to overcome information and resource problems without having to occupy opposition areas.

The second question pertains to intentionality: whether the benefits of displacement that I have described are fully anticipated by combatants, and at what level of command. The principle-agent problem is particularly acute in Syria, where the regime is not a unitary actor but a loose coalition of army units, locally hired thugs, Iranian-backed foreign militias, and members of the Russian military. I suspect that my theory applies to displacement caused by indirect violence inflicted by Syrian and Russian forces, but not to the practices of allied Shiite militias, which have narrower objectives and are more overtly sectarian in character. At the tactical level, even arbitrary airstrikes can be part of a larger strategy to dislodge and disaggregate the population, particularly if the arbitrariness is part of what incentivizes people to flee or influences where they go.

These questions underscore the need to better document and compare different strategies and tactics of forced displacement, their distinct motivations, the conditions that give rise to them, and their consequences. This is important for holding perpetrators accountable and has implications for policy efforts to manage and mitigate wartime displacement. A consequence of international actors’ willingness to intervene on behalf of displaced populations is that aid agencies could provide perverse incentives for combatants to uproot civilians. The Syrian regime is incapable of providing relief to IDPs without external assistance, and internal UN documents suggest that food aid, by attracting civilians to government areas, has played into its strategy. This would not be the first case of humanitarian actors enabling military policies of civilian displacement.

Such measures also highlight the strategic imperative for humanitarian corridors and more generous asylum policies. Efforts by Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon to tighten their borders have forced uprooted Syrians to choose between regime areas, territories ruled by the Islamic State, and vulnerable IDP camps in Idlib and Aleppo, which factions like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham have targeted for recruitment. This makes improving exit options of political, and not just humanitarian, import because it would deprive armed groups of vulnerable recruits while undercutting the regime’s efforts to use IDPs as a propaganda tool. During the Cold War, refugees from the Soviet bloc were prized
political assets whose “very presence exposed the faults of communist systems and the comparative merits of the West.” Something similar could be said today of Syrians fleeing ruthless authoritarianism or violent extremism. Yet the international response to Syria’s displaced seems predicated on humanitarian impulses – with scant discussion of the strategic benefits of asylum and refugee resettlement.

Adam G. Lichtenheld is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and a consultant for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

(Endnotes)


9 Indeed, this same logic has been used to explain mass killing. See Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, “Draining the Sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare,” *International Organization*, 58, 2 (2004): 375-407).


12 Steele (2009) and Steele & Balcells (2016) find that IDPs in Colombia and Spain fled to places with a greater density of people who share their political identity.


21 Holliday 2013: 23.


24 See Balanche 2015.

25 Author interview, Istanbul, Turkey, 20 December 2016.

26 “President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue,” SANA, transcript of BBC interview, 10 February 2016, http://sana.sy/en/?p=28047


28 Most are not arrested. For example, between November and December 2016, between 50,000 to 100,000 IDPs reportedly fled from rebel-held Eastern Aleppo to government-run Western Aleppo. Around 2,000 people were reportedly arrested. See Atlantic Council, Breaking Aleppo, Washington, D.C.: February 2017, http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/;

29 Author interview with Syrian journalist, Istanbul, Turkey, 11 January 2017.

30 Author interview, Istanbul, Turkey, 20 December 2016.


Inaction as Policy-Making: Understanding Lebanon’s Early Response to the Refugee Influx

Lama Mourad, University of Toronto

With the largest refugee population per capita in the world, Lebanon now officially hosts at least 1.1 million Syrian refugees alongside a local population of approximately four million. Until late 2014, the Lebanese government maintained de facto open borders and little to no regulation of Syrians within its borders. This period has largely understood as one of state absence: referred to broadly as a “policy of no-policy.” This paper aims to advance and nuance this notion in two ways. First, I look at the way in which state inaction played a major role in structuring the responses that did emerge, both “below” and “above” the state, that is namely by local authorities and international agencies. Second, I shed light on how indirect measures taken by the central government facilitated and encouraged greater local autonomy in governing the refugee presence, while simultaneously denying municipalities central funds and rendering them even more dependent on international aid. This, in turn, further decentralized and fragmented the current set of responses to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and legitimized discretionary action by municipal authorities.

I begin by briefly outlining the Lebanese political context during and in the run-up to the early years of the Syrian uprising, under which it was seemingly impossible for the Lebanese government to develop a comprehensive response to the refugee influx. This changed, ultimately, with the pronouncement of the 2014 October Policy, broadly recognized as a critical shift in the government’s response to the refugee presence. Without denying the significance of this change, this paper focuses primarily on the period preceding the October policy. In doing so, I aim to “move away from an emphasis on active and observable intervention” to take seriously the critical role that inaction can play in shaping outcomes.

The Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict posed a particularly distinct challenge for the Lebanese government. Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 2005, the Lebanese political class has largely been divided between factions broadly considered loyal (“March 8”) and opposed (“March 14”) to the Syrian regime. This polarization was accompanied by a great deal of political instability. From 2011 until 2014, Lebanon went through three changes in government under the authority of three different Prime Ministers. Prior to the election of Michel Aoun in October 2016, the country had been without a President for over two years. Adding to this constant change of leadership were long periods of deadlock and political vacuum, as the formation of new governments consistently brought to the fore major divisions and extended political jockeying.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that political actors, and analysts, at the time were gravely concerned about the potential for the country to be drawn into the conflict in Syria. This fear of “spillover” led the Lebanese National Dialogue Committee to adopt

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4. For more on this, see Filippo Dionigi, “The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: State Fragility and Social Resilience” (LSE Middle East Centre, 2016).
5. An institution that has its roots in the early days of the Lebanese civil war, the National Dialogue Committee brings together leading political and sectarian leaders to discuss key issues of contention. It was revived in 2006 in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and has been resorted to on many instances since as a way to overcome (with mixed success) political gridlock on key issues related to national stability. See Farid El-Khazen, The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 315–22; The Monthly, “39 Years of Lebanese Dialogue From the National Dialogue Committee to the Baabda Dialogue Committee” (The Monthly Magazine,
the 2012 Baabda Declaration, which affirmed (among other provisions) the commitment of political actors in the country to “eschew block politics and regional and international conflicts [...] and avoid the negative repercussions of regional tensions and crises in order to preserve its own paramount interest, national unity and civil peace.”

In contrast, little attention was given to the importance of managing the refugee presence as both political factions in the country wagered that refugees would be a short-term reality; they believed the conflict itself would be resolved relatively quickly—albeit with each faction predicting vastly different outcomes.

This greatly lessened the sense of a need for a comprehensive response to the refugee influx and made the presence of refugees more vulnerable to political instrumentalization.

In this early period, the position of political actors in Lebanon was primarily driven by their respective positions on the Syrian conflict. For example, March 14 generally presented as allies and symbols of the broader resistance against Damascus. This is embodied perhaps most starkly in a speech given by Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces and a leading Christian figure within March 14, during the 2012 memorial of Rafik Hariri’s assassination. In it, he salutes the people of Homs, Idlib, Deraa, Hama, Zabadani, Deir Ezzour, Douma, Al-Saramayn, and Jisr ash-Shughur, whose “blood […] is speaking to the blood of Rafik Hariri […] and the other martyrs of the Cedar revolution.”

As the number of Syrians in the country grew, so did divisions within March 14, particularly on the subject of refugees: by late 2013, Geagea was calling for the creation of “safe areas” in Syria to which refugees should be relocated—a position previously primarily advocated by March 8. The Syrian elections of May 2014, when thousands of Syrians came out in support of President Assad in Beirut, proved to be a pivotal turning point in the domestic political landscape. This moment catalyzed the development of a greater consensus on the need to address the refugee presence, culminating in the adoption of the October Policy a few months later. Adopted by the Council of Ministers, this policy explicitly aimed to “reduce the number of displaced Syrians” by severely limiting return to Syria or through resettlement to other countries, strengthening security provision, and “alleviating the burden” of “displaced Syrians” on the Lebanese economy and labor force.

At the time of adoption of the October Policy, the registered Syrian refugee population in Lebanon had reached over 1.1 million. While the North and Bekaa—the two first regions to receive Syrian refugees—continued to have the largest number, the population had spread widely throughout the country [see Figure 1]. The central government’s attempt to provide an over-arching policy added yet another layer of governance within a context of already fragmented authorities. The following section highlights the ways in which two critical inactions by the central government helped shape the complex landscape that emerged.

De facto “Open Border” Policy

The first of these inactions was the decision to maintain the pre-existing border entry regulations. Lauded for


7 Interview with Senior Advisor to the Minister of Interior and Municipalities, July 2016.


allowing for relatively unfettered access to the territory, this inaction—often misrepresented as an explicit open border policy— resulted in the maintenance of an ambiguous legal status for Syrians in the country. In addition, the government’s refusal to build refugee camps—or develop an alternative central shelter policy—formed arguably the most critical inaction of the response; it propelled unprepared and under-resourced municipal authorities into a central and at times contentious role. As a result, in lieu of a state retreat and emergence of a “UN ‘surrogate state’” as has been seen with previous refugee movements in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East, the response to the Syrian refugee influx has been characterized primarily by its decentralization and ambiguity.

Prior to the changes outlined in the October Policy and the ensuing border measures adopted by General Security in early 2015, Syrians entered Lebanon on the basis of a 1993 bilateral agreement that allowed for the relatively free movement between the two countries. Under these conditions, a Syrian individual could enter Lebanon through an official border crossing and be granted residency for six months, with the possibility of free renewal for up to one year (after which it could be renewed for a fee for another two six-month periods). Exceptions and further provisions were in place if a Syrian required residency for a more extended period of time. Critically, no provisions were put in place to distinguish between Syrians fleeing conflict and Syrian labor migrants, of which there were already between 300 and 700,000 in the country. This lack of distinction was echoed in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) registration procedures in the country, whereby any Syrian who arrived at a UNHCR registration office, following a short interview and formal procedures, would receive a registration document and access to aid and services. Not quite a prima facie recognition, registration was done on:

Figure 1: Syrian refugees registered, by governorate (31 December 2014) Source: Syria Refugee Response Portal


the basis of an abbreviated refugee status determination process, and only 1.5% of those who requested refugee status were denied.\textsuperscript{17} The Government of Lebanon appeared to accept UNHCR’s authority in this process. However, it refused from the onset to use the term “refugee,” preferring the word “displaced”—a word with less historical, and legal, weight.

The importance of this designation was severely called into question in mid-2014. First, in the aftermath of the aforementioned mobilization of Syrians to vote in the Syrian elections, March 14 leaders—previously the strongest political advocates of refugees in Lebanon—called for the removal of the label of “displaced” for all those who voted in the election.\textsuperscript{18} This was quickly then followed by the Lebanese government asking “UNHCR to review the cases of all Syrians registered with the Office [UNHCR] who had gone to Syria and returned to Lebanon after June 1, 2014.” Their return to Syria, in the eyes of the government, made their claim to refugee status subject to question. According to UNHCR, 16,000 Syrians had their refugee status “inactivated” following this review.\textsuperscript{19} The conditions of these inactivations remain opaque, but point to the potential for these ambiguous legal categories to be the subject of contention and ultimately politicization. In turn, this would prove instrumental in justifying the government’s decision to halt to the registration of Syrians in May 2015 on the basis of a need to overhaul the refugee registration system entirely. As of that date, Syrians may be “recorded” within UNHCR’s database, have access to services and aid, but cannot receive UNHCR registration documents granting them de facto refugee status.

The ambiguity of the distinction between “refugees” or “displaced” on the one hand, and Syrian migrants on the other came up repeatedly in interviews with municipal and regional authorities. In one case, a district official told me that a municipality I was planning on visiting—one where over 2000 Syrian refugees were registered as of January 2015—“had no refugees.”\textsuperscript{20} By that, he meant that most Syrians there had previously been in the village as seasonal laborers, and now had returned to settle more permanently with their families. Syrians I met in that village did often have long-standing ties to it as labour migrants, but had brought their families to settle with them only following the beginning of the conflict in Syria. This was the case for many—if not most—Syrians in Lebanon, who either have family ties and/or labor ties in the places they settled. This dual identity, exacerbated by a border policy that did not acknowledge humanitarian entry, has made Syrians more vulnerable to popular attacks of an unjustified claim of being “true” refugees.

**Non-Encampment**

The second critical inaction was the government’s refusal to build official refugee camps or alternatively adopt any central shelter policy. The reasons for rejecting encampment relate in large part to what Shadi Karam, Senior Advisor to then-President Sleiman and later Chief Advisor to Prime Minister Tamam Salam, called “a fear…a paranoia [within the country]…concerning what could be related to the Palestinian experience.”\textsuperscript{21} While non-encampment has the potential of greater freedom and rights for refugees, the lack of adoption of an alternative shelter policy created challenges for both UNHCR and for local communities who became the primary hosts of Syrian refugees.

\textsuperscript{17} According to UNHCR, the main reasons for rejection were (1) the applicant was already registered; (2) they were Lebanese. See: Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum, “Background Paper on Unregistered Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” July 15, 2014, http://lhif.org/uploaded/News/d92fe3a1b1dd46f2a281254fa551bd09LHIF%20Background%20Paper%20on%20Unregistered%20Syrian%20Refugees%20%20%20%20%20%20.pdf.


\textsuperscript{20} Interview with District Official, North Governorate, August 2016.

\textsuperscript{21} Shadi Karam, “Lecture: Post-UN General Assembly Summit on Refugees and Migrants” (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, October 24, 2016).
In addition to the oft-cited challenges of efficient aid distribution within non-camp settings, the self-settlement of Syrian refugees across Lebanon’s over 1700 localities has meant that UNHCR must contend with a wide variety of partners as well as competitors. This has meant an extensive effort at “coordination” with often mixed success. Over 70 partners are identified as partners within the 2015-2016 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, but this number greatly underestimates the number of NGOs operating on the ground who choose to remain outside of these multilateral forums.

The self-settlement of refugees also placed a disproportionate and unequal pressure on local communities and municipal governments. Despite their legal independence as local authorities (solta mahaliyye), municipalities have thus far been excluded from any formal policy-making role with their representation within the development of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan being limited to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM). However, through their ability to control access to refugee populations, municipalities became critical interlocutors for UN agencies and NGOs working on the ground. In mid-2013, UNHCR created the position of Liaison Officer within its operations, whose primary role is to maintain and enhance with relationships with local authorities. Despite their exclusion from the formal policy arena, this frontline role helped enhance the power of municipalities and transformed them into one of the most critical actors within the refugee response.

This role has not been unequivocally positive, however. The first major sign of tensions came in 2012, when a number of municipalities in Mount Lebanon laid banners

with their villages and towns banning Syrians from movement from evening to early morning, effectively putting in place discriminatory curfews within their geographical boundaries. Despite garnering noticeable media attention, the measures did not prompt any immediate response from the national government. When pressed by journalists, then-Minister of Interior and Municipalities Marwan Charbel specified that these curfews were “illegal” as they fall outside of the mandate of municipalities. Throughout 2013, this practice became more commonplace, spreading beyond Mount Lebanon. By mid-2013, curfews were being reported regularly in Protection Working Group meetings. A study conducted by REACH/OCHA among 252 communities found that curfews were the most common form of “community” or municipal guideline. The report states that within 83 communities, at least 50% of surveyed residents report the presence of a curfew. A Human Rights Watch report conducted in 2014 cites at least 45 municipalities across the country that had implemented similar guidelines.

In my own research, I have identified 142 municipalities that have put in place curfews aimed at Syrians. Due to the underreporting and difficulty of tracking curfews, this number undoubtedly underestimates the scale of the phenomenon.

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25 Interview with UNOCHA, January 2016.


28 UNICEF, OCHA, and REACH, “Defining Community Vulnerabilities in Lebanon, Assessment Report: September 2014-February 2015,” 2015, 9. By no measure, however, were curfews the only measure adopted by municipalities in response to the Syrian refugee presence. For instance, many municipalities began “registering” refugees living within their village, while others put restrictions on rentals by Syrians. See pp.87-88 for further “community guidelines.”


30 This figure relies on data collected during a year of fieldwork in Lebanon, as well as newspaper articles and NGO reports.
While curfews, and other so-called “community guidelines,” are often understood and analyzed as a purely local-level phenomenon—alongside issues of “host-community tensions”—it is critical to place them within the broader context of national policy. At times, this can be more explicit than others: for example, there is evidence that the government security cell in the Nabatieh qada (district), which includes the district governor as well as representatives from all state security institutions, and reports directly to the MoIM, issued a statement recommending curfews to all municipalities in the district (al-Masri 2015). However, I would argue that this extends beyond these instances of explicit directives. After unsuccessful attempts in 2013 to centralize data on Syrians through regional security cells, central authorities took measures that emboldened and strengthened municipal authorities to take on a more direct role in the governance and security response. This, in turn, legitimized greater decentralization and informalization of the response, and in particular its security elements.

In late 2013, following a meeting with over 800 municipalities and municipal unions, the MoIM put forward a security plan that strengthened the role of municipalities in the provision of security. Put in place in September 2013, the plan called for, among other provisions: arming municipal police; establishing joint patrols between the International Security Forces (ISF) and municipal police under the authority of the mayor and the relevant heads of security; compiling a list of organizations within each municipality that provide security within its boundaries; confiscating the documents of displaced Syrians in every town/village and overseeing the issue of aid and assistance. Critically, the plan has little in the way of oversight over these powers, specifying that the national security forces will refrain from pursuing municipal police or guards for actions related to the performance of their duties, unless approved by the Mayor. Moreover, it makes no mention of municipal curfews or other discriminatory policies directed at Syrian refugees. As ALEF, the Lebanese Association for Human Rights, states: “[the plan] may in fact be encouraging the continuation of ad hoc security measures by municipalities. In an atmosphere of rising distrust and discontent among host and refugee communities, leaving security at the discretion of elected local governments may heighten protection and security concerns.”

As the MoIM expanded the role and duties of municipal authorities, the funds allotted to them did not follow suit. While municipalities can levy their own taxes, the rate of collection varies greatly from municipality to another but, on average, is quite low and estimated to be around 50%. Most municipalities rely almost exclusively on transfers from the central government. In 2013, transfers to municipalities dropped 11.7% compared to the prior year (from 669 to 591 billion LL or approximately 446 to 394 million USD). While this improved slightly in 2014, when the transfers were increased to 709 billion LL (approx. 472 USD), it did little to alleviate the situation of already impoverished municipal budgets as transfers from the Telecommunications tax earmarked for municipalities had not been disbursed since January 2010. By December 2014, this had amounted to over LL 739 billion in revenues (approx. 492 USD). One outcome of this budgetary deficit was the increased reliance on private contractors (haras), who are paid daily rates and remain outside the official municipal budget, to provide security.

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32 Circular from Ministry of Interior and Municipalities to Governors, “Recommendations Related to the Operation of Municipal Police Taken during the Biel Meeting of 5 September 2013,” 11 September 2013


within municipalities. These contractors were specifically mentioned and legitimized in the main articles of the security plan, and included within the provisions of the circular on the use of weapons.

Despite the institution of these measures, the MoIM has continued to argue that municipal curfews and discretionary violence by municipal police targeting refugees is illegal, and even arrested (and then promptly released) municipal police officers involved in a heavily mediatized incident where Syrian men were detained in the central square of a village while police officers confiscated their identification documents. This distancing, I argue, serves an important political role: framing these instances as a purely local, extralegal or even illegal, phenomenon is an attempt to alleviate the state's responsibility for them while allowing the government to use their presence as evidence of greater need to support Lebanese institutions and host communities. In this sense, they figure within the broader narrative of host-refugee tensions that increasingly animates the international humanitarian response in Lebanon and justifies a shift away from a focus on refugee rights towards a policy of stability and containment.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, the multiplicity of responses to the Syrian refugee influx in Lebanon cannot be understood without an analysis that places their co-constitution at its center. While local agencies and international organizations, namely UNHCR and its partners, emerged as the central actors in the early policy response in the country, their ability to emerge as such was enabled by core inactions by the central state. In this way, I aim to contribute to a growing interest in moving beyond “a bias in the social sciences towards the study of political activity, to the virtual neglect of political inactivity.”

In my analysis, critical inactions by the central state in Lebanon played a major role in enabling the emergence of alternative actors, whose actions were ultimately bounded and structured by the context created by these inactions. Moreover, I argue that the increasingly decentralized and informal security approach to the refugee presence was structured by the central authorities’ legitimization of ad hoc, and illegal, actions taken by municipal authorities in this period. As a result, I argue that it is now misleading to view these policies as a reflection of purely, or even primarily, local drivers. Instead, I argue that emphasizing the seemingly localized and informal nature of these practices allows central state authorities to simultaneously distance themselves from them and use their presence as leverage to shift greater international donor support towards Lebanese host communities and Lebanese state institutions.

Lama Mourad is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto.

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36 Interviews with Senior Advisor to the Minister of Interior and Municipalities, July 2016, August 2016.

The Real Refugee Crisis is in the Middle East, not Europe*

By Kelsey P. Norman, University of California at Irvine
Lisel Hintz, Cornell University
Rawan Arar, University of California at San Diego

The Syrian conflict has reached its fifth year, but the European aspect of the refugee crisis it generated has dominated news headlines since the summer of 2015. Numerous academic panels have been convened to discuss how the European Union is (not) coping with its increasing numbers of asylum seekers. A supra-national entity of 500 million, the E.U. is up in arms at the 1 million Syrian refugees who entered its borders last year. To put this in perspective, that’s about the same number of Syrian refugees currently in Lebanon, a country of just 4.5 million. While the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region currently hosts around 4.8 million Syrian refugees alone (not to mention Iraqi, Palestinian and many others), they are treated more as passive refugee-hosting vessels than as actors with their own interests.

Hosting refugees is not easy, logistically or politically; the E.U. has made this abundantly clear. MENA host communities are already struggling with myriad challenges including recent regime upheaval and ongoing ethnic and sectarian conflict. Foisting the responsibility of hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees onto states such as Jordan and Egypt with the assumption they are intrinsically willing and able to care for them is a seriously misguided case of passing the buck. Shoving money at states such as Turkey in the hopes of making the problem go away while turning a blind eye to how that money is spent is equally thorny.

Because refugee displacement has largely been framed as a European challenge by European actors, major MENA refugee-hosting states have fallen outside conversations on durable solutions. When the E.U. does give MENA states a seat at the table, such as in recent negotiations with Turkey, its strategy involves pledging money and making impracticable promises in the hope the problem will disappear without adequately considering the challenges the states and the refugees they host will face.

Based on our fieldwork conducted in Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, we argue that MENA host states must be taken seriously as actors with specific stakes in the refugee system. Acknowledging these stakes, and the complex internal dynamics that shape them, will help develop a more broadly international refugee regime that addresses the needs of refugees and host communities alike.

Turkey: Payoffs, politicking, and empty promises

Turkey has taken responsibility for by far the largest number of refugees: about 3 million. Like Lebanon, Turkey already struggles with perceived cleavages along ethnic, sectarian and other identity lines. Also like Lebanon and its influx of Palestinian refugees, Turkey has faced repeated demographic destabilizations in hosting refugees fleeing violence in neighboring countries such as Bulgaria and Iraq. The challenges of incorporating millions of Syrian refugees into Turkey’s already contentious social fabric need serious attention.

While policies enacted by Turkey’s governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) can be criticized as increasingly authoritarian at home and aggressive abroad, Turkey’s response to rising numbers of refugees was commendable. Initially eschewing international support to prove Turkey could handle the influx of refugees without the West via an open-door, “zero problems with neighbors” policy, AKP leaders proudly welcomed refugees as Muslim coreligionists, spending billions of dollars to host them in generally well-run tent cities. When it became clear, however, that an end to the Syrian crisis was nowhere in sight, the AKP government turned to the international community for assistance.

*This piece originally appeared in the Monkey Cage at the Washington Post
Turkey’s recent “1-for-1” deal with the E.U., in which Syrian refugees entering Greece will be swapped for an equal number of Syrians already in Turkey’s refugee camps, can best be understood as “opportunistic transactionalism.” In exchange for agreeing to host Syrians sent back to its territory, Turkey will supposedly receive billions in European aid along with reinvigorated visa liberalization and E.U. accession processes.

The deal is legally dubious; it appears to violate international humanitarian law’s prohibitions on mass deportations and insistence that refugees be returned to safe third countries. Equally worrisome, the deal is structured around the morally dubious practice of burden-shifting. In doing so, the E.U. essentially pays Turkey to deal with a problem of which its member states would prefer to wash their hands — when in reality its member states are much better equipped to engage in burden-sharing than its MENA neighbors. An agreement that commits member states to host numbers of refugees proportionate to their populations may be politically challenging, especially given the reactionary rise of ultra-right nationalist parties in some states, but is by no means infeasible.

In the future, treating Turkey as an equal partner rather than as a holding tank means keeping the AKP accountable for its end of the bargain. Turkey’s worryingly erratic and bullish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, threatened to send busloads of refugees to Europe if his financial demands were not met during E.U. negotiations, casting serious doubt on Turkey’s commitment to the refugees’ well-being.

Opposition party claims that funding for refugees is being distributed along partisan lines create further cause for concern. Of more imminent concern is the ouster of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu for someone more willing to do Erdogan’s bidding, which threatens to “upend” the (albeit flawed) E.U. deal.

The refugees in Turkey, and their host community, deserve better than payoffs, politicking, and empty promises. Hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking work in Istanbul’s formal and informal sectors live in dire conditions but are blamed by Turkey’s citizens for rising residential rents and declining wages. Istanbul is not unique in this predicament; only about 10 percent of Turkey’s refugee population lives in the tent cities the state constructed. Many other urban centers, crowded with refugees seeking work opportunities unavailable in tent cities, are in desperate need of well-supervised programs providing education, job training, and clean and safe housing. Research shows that these forms of aid, if delivered well, can help refugees become an economic and social boon to their host communities rather than the burden they are too often judged to be.

**Jordan: ‘Host community fatigue’**

For almost 70 years, Jordan has accepted generations of refugees from the Palestinian territories, Iraq and Syria. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that 638,000 Syrian refugees live in Jordan; official Jordanian statistics put the number at 1.3 million.

Refugees settle in Jordan, but they also flow through en route to Europe. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, 2.5 million Syrians have entered Jordan, according to Jordan’s Refugee Affairs Coordination Office. In addition to the 1.3 million Syrians now settled in Jordan, approximately 150,000 refugees returned to Syria, while the rest are assumed to have traveled to Turkey or North Africa in search of a route to Europe. Jordan is an important host country as well as a transit country for asylum seekers.

These numbers matter. They matter to the Jordanian state because the number of refugees hosted by the country is proportional to the amount of international aid the state receives.

Jordan has been accused of exaggerating the number of refugees within its borders to solicit greater financial contributions. Meanwhile, Jordanian officials have accused the United Nations of exaggerating the number of refugees stranded at the border to embarrass Jordan into accepting more refugees. It should not be assumed that MENA states are expected to accept all refugees while Western
states have the right to control who crosses their borders and when. "Jordan is a sovereign state. We have legitimate security concerns," emphasized Jordanian government spokesman Mohammad Momani.

Jordanian officials have not used the same xenophobic rhetoric that surfaced in Eastern Europe, the United States and Australia to discourage refugee settlement. But Jordanians have vocally criticized a perceived decline in their standard of living and feel the ache of “host community fatigue” as the refugee burden includes rising costs and crowded schools, streets and hospitals.

“...essential to ensure that doing the right thing does not come at the expense of Jordan’s youth and the opportunities our next generation will have in life,” King Abdullah II wrote in an article for the Independent. He urged Western donor states to finance humanitarian relief and “sustainable development-based goals.” Investing in Jordan’s infrastructure not only helps Jordanians and refugees in Jordan, but it also serves the interests of Western states that wish to stem the flow of refugees.

**Egypt: Turning a blind eye**

While not typically thought of as a refugee host state, Egypt ranks as one of the top five countries hosting Syrians, with approximately 267,000 refugees, including 140,000 Syrians, although the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated in 2015 that 100,000 Syrians were living unregistered in the country. Egypt tends to turn a blind eye to its refugee population and generally refrains from providing state-funded services directly to individuals. But this ambivalence does not mean that the Egyptian state is unaware of certain gains derived from hosting refugees.

One benefit for the Egyptian state is the presence of organizations such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration, in addition to smaller migration-focused international non-governmental organizations. These entities bring in international funding that also translates into development financing for the broader Egyptian populace, and also directly provide essential services for refugees that the Egyptian government might otherwise have to provide itself.

This is the “perverse incentive” facing many MENA host states; if refugees appear self-sufficient and integrated into their host communities, the international community will feel less obligated to contribute aid in the name of burden-sharing.

Refugees themselves also provide economic benefits to Egypt. Because of the country’s large informal economy, some refugees have found jobs in the garment, food, artisanal and industrial sectors — in addition to others who do domestic work in wealthy Egyptian households as cleaners, nannies and drivers. Yet another benefit is remittances from the Persian Gulf region, Europe and North America to refugees living in Egypt who then spend the money locally. Lastly, Egypt receives international credibility for its willingness to host refugees, a topic that is raised during negotiations with European countries regarding the treatment of Egyptian emigrants abroad.

Giving MENA states a meaningful seat at the table while making sure that they are holding up their end of the hosting bargain is a tricky balancing act but one that is needed to develop a more broadly international and effective refugee-protection system. Failing to take the needs of host states seriously creates the risk of governments’ reacting rashly to perceived inequality of responsibility, as was evidenced last week in Kenya, with the government’s decision to close its refugee camps, potentially displacing 600,000 individuals. Only in considering these needs can we propose feasible solutions that address the well-being of refugees and their host communities immediately and in the longer term.

Rawan Arar is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of California at San Diego and a researcher at the Center for Comparative and Immigration Studies. Lisel Hintz is a postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University’s Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies. Kelsey P. Norman is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California at Irvine.
Culture or Bureaucracy?
Challenges in Syrian refugees’ initial incorporation in Germany

Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University

In 2015, 1.1 million people sought asylum in Germany, nearly 40 percent of them Syrian. The mood of this deluge, while sometimes chaotic, was overwhelmingly upbeat. For Syrians fleeing death or despair, Germany represented a haven in which to build new lives with freedom and dignity. For many Germans, an open-door policy was an ethical humanitarian stance in which to take pride.

By 2016, much of this optimism had given way to deep anxiety. German society articulated a host of worries, ranging from terrorism to crime, growing polarization in society, and new doubt in government institutions. Many citizens also spoke of fears related to culture.¹ During my field research in Berlin from June-September 2016, for example, I often heard such questions as, “Will refugees’ foreign habits overwhelm and transform German society? Will they accept values such as gender equality and gay rights? Is Islam compatible with democracy?” Curiously, I never heard Syrian asylum seekers mention such concerns. Perhaps this will come later. During the initial stage of their residence in Europe, however, refugees appeared consumed with the most basic “nuts and bolts” of survival. Facing this challenge, the single most significant challenge was not with Germany’s Western, Christian-majority culture, but the overwhelming presence of its state bureaucracy.

Governmental responsibility for asylum seekers in Germany is dispersed vertically across the federal state, 16 regional states, and municipalities, as well as horizontally across various government departments and civil society organizations.² This web of institutions, as well as the maze of laws and policies that they enforce, defines asylum seekers’ first years in Germany. It also leaves many refugees feeling that they dedicate the bulk of their time and mental space to waiting for appointments and completing paperwork. Indeed, the maze of red tape can be so baffling that a team of young Syrians developed an app, dubbed “Bureaucrazy,” to navigate it.³

Syrian asylum seekers’ interface with this bureaucracy comes to the fore in three realms of essential and everyday concerns during their initial residence in Germany: legal status, housing, and work.

Legal Status

The German Basic law guarantees the right to political asylum. To obtain it, asylum seekers must jump through a series of bureaucratic hoops. With the inundation of refugees in 2015, even getting the process started became a challenge. In Berlin, for example, hundreds of refugees waited outside for days outside the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (then nicknamed the LaGeSo and now renamed the State Office of Asylum Affairs, or LAF), before they could submit their asylum applications. A Syrian who came with that wave recalled:

Every day I would go to the LaGeSo and wait from seven o’clock to four o’clock. They did not assign


people numbers, so people would sleep outside overnight to hold their spot in line. It took me forty days even to enter the building. I got a number, and then it took another thirty days for my number to show up on the screen. There was no organization. You have number 80 and I have number 90, but number 100 might get called before us. Every day I had to show up, just to see if my number was called.\(^4\)

Upon applying for asylum, applicants receive a temporary residency identity card while the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees (BAMF) evaluates their application. In 2016, Syrians waited an average of 10-12 months from arrival in Germany to receipt of their asylum decision.\(^5\) Of 295,040 decisions on Syrian asylum applications in 2016, the state granted 56 percent refugee status, which offered a three-year residence permit with rights to apply for family reunification. It granted 41 percent of Syrian applicants subsidiary protection, which entailed a one-year residence permit extendable for two years and no eligibility for family reunification during a two-year transitional period.\(^6\)

Stories circulated of Syrians who made it to Germany only to return to Turkey or even Syria when they realized that they would not be able to bring their families to join them. These concerns, not those related to culture or religion, were typically at the forefront for asylum seekers’ preoccupations during their first year in Germany.

**Housing**

Germany’s 2007 Asylum Procedure Act specifies that asylum seekers be transferred to the nearest reception center in accord with a quota system distributing them across federal states. Asylum seekers must live in their initial reception center or living facility for their first three months.\(^7\)

In the wake of the 2015 influx, German states and municipalities improvised hundreds of new temporary living facilities, making refugee shelters out of sports halls, municipality buildings, and even the hangers of the defunct Tempelhof airport. In these accommodations, refugees of all nationalities and ages typically ate prepared meals at set times, shared bathrooms, and coped with the sounds and smells expected when hundreds of people live together. Sometimes offices were transformed into bedrooms for two or more roommates, and sometimes people had no privacy beyond the cubicles that partitioned large open spaces into separate sleeping quarters.

While different regional states and municipalities have had different levels of success in relocating refugees, hundreds of thousands continue to live in temporary shelters. Berlin is now addressing this crisis with plans to erect clusters of shed-like container homes and modular residential buildings around the city.\(^8\) Meanwhile, refugees compete with locals both for affordable social housing and commercial rentals. Competition is particularly stiff in Berlin and other major cities, which appeal to newcomers due to their dynamic labor markets and existing immigrant

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\(^7\) Laubenthal, 125, 131.

milieus, but whose housing markets are already squeezed by large numbers of young Germans moving there from provincial areas.9

When searching for an apartment, refugees must navigate language barriers and master complex rental rules. As specified by law, they must pull together a considerable amount of paperwork to submit a rental application. If they then manage to obtain a rental agreement, they must submit it to the appropriate social services office for approval.10 A Syrian living in an emergency shelter for nearly one year explained that this could represent not the end of the process as much as the beginning of a new one:

If a miracle happens and you’re able to find a room in a shared apartment, then you go to the Immigration Office to submit the paperwork. They’ll tell you to come back in two weeks. And then if a second miracle happens and the landlord agrees to wait for you, then you go back to the Immigration Office, and they study your application for another month. And then if God really loves you, you’ll get approved. So the whole process takes one and a half to two months. But the problem is that no apartment is going to wait that long for you. There is a long list of other people who also want that room.11

Housing— which literally and figuratively structures the most intimate dimensions of life— remains an overwhelming preoccupation for many refugees and the paramount obstacle to their acquiring a sense of normalcy. It is also another nexus of refugees’ interface with the state and one that confirms the centrality of the governmental bureaucracy, not cultural matters, in refugees’ everyday consternations.

Work

Under the principle “support and challenge,” Germany’s May 2016 Integration Act pledged to give refugees’ greater and earlier access to integration courses and job and training opportunities, while reducing the benefits of those “who do not meet their duties to cooperate.”12

As of November 2016, some 406,000 refugees were registered at state agencies as searching for employment. To expedite engagement in “meaningful work,” the 2016 integration legislation pledged to create 100,000 new “one-euro jobs,” for which asylum seekers are paid an 80 cents-per-hour supplement to do such tasks as laundry, cleaning, or food distribution in refugee shelters. Though they risked losing benefits should they refuse to participate, only 4,300 refugees had started one-euro jobs by December 2016.13

Meanwhile, many asylum seekers complain about the ways in which bureaucracy stand in the way of employment. One Iranian refugee described being caught in an “endless spiral” in which government agencies told her than an employer was needed to obtain formal permission to work, while employers insisted that they could not hire her without formal permission.14 A young Syrian told me of similar troubles:

I got an internship at a telecommunications company. I was there three months and I learned so much. They really liked me and they offered me a job. But I can’t work until I get my residency permit, and I’m still waiting for it. A sister company also offered me a job. They said I could do another internship from September until December. They’re willing to pay

11 Pearlman, We Crossed A Bridge.
me, but the law allows you to have only one paid internship, and I already had one.\textsuperscript{15}

Conclusion

At a time when the United States is closing its doors to refugees (after accepting only 18,007 Syrian refugees from October 2011 through the end of 2016), Germany’s welcoming of people fleeing Syria is extraordinary. Though Angela Merkel’s government has retreated from its open door policy since 2015, it also committed billions of dollars to refugee welfare, hired and trained more than 10,000 new employees and German language teachers, transformed countless public spaces into living accommodations, and devoted incalculable ingenuity to the task of transforming the refugee crisis into a success story.

Still, the same state that has made asylum and integration possible occasionally leaves refugees bewildered or even dismayed. In my conversations with Syrians who have resettled in Germany since 2015, the bureaucracy surrounding and shaping their key life challenges—namely the uncertainty and wait for legal status, the complicated move from temporary shelters to homes of their own, and the struggle around barriers to work—has emerged as one of their most significant sources of anxiety. That these issues rise to the fore for displaced Syrians, while cultural questions hardly grab their attention, does not mean that cultural differences do not matter. Still, Germans might be surprised to the extent that the cultural concerns that feature prominently in their own anxieties appear far less important to refugees. This disconnect highlights both the need for greater communication between locals and newcomers and the tremendous opportunity that exists for meaningful mutual understanding. The greatest sources of worry among Syrians in Germany have little to do with conservative dress, gender norms, or religious traditions, and much to do with a yearning for personal stability and independence. Germans can take heart that, in this, Syrian refugees’ core values are quite compatible with German values, after all.

\textit{Wendy Pearlman is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. Her book, We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled: Voices from Syria, will be published by HarperCollins in June 2017.}

\textsuperscript{15} Interview in Berlin, Germany, on August 1, 2011.
Vetting Trump’s Vetting of Refugees

Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University

On January 27, President Trump signed an Executive Order banning citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria for 90 days, stopping all refugee resettlement for four months, and barring all Syrian refugees indefinitely.

Though the policy is being severely challenged in the courts, the White House’s elevation of a politicized, securitized discourse on refugee questions should remain an issue of deep concern for those of us who study the Middle East. Our work brings us into contact with refugees – defined as persons who have been forced to flee their countries due to war, violence, or persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group – in many ways. We document and analyze the conditions that produce refugees and trace the effects of population flows on the political, economic, and social geography of the countries we study. We also investigate refugees as subjects in their own right: interviewing and surveying them, mapping their dispersion, and measuring their behavior, organization, attitudes, and identities. When conditions make it difficult for us to get to particular areas, we often turn to refugees, as well as migrants and exiles, as vital sources of information and insight about conditions there.

Given the extent to which refugees figure into our work directly or indirectly, the Middle East studies community should take hostility to Middle East refugees as a challenge its own mission to promote understanding of the region and its peoples. In what follows, I sketch four ways in which we can meet this challenge by contesting some of the key ideas justifying the new policy.

1. Extreme what, exactly?

As a candidate, Trump repeatedly said that the U.S. government had little information about the Syrian refugees it accepted and, on that basis, proposed a new program of “extreme vetting.” He made this point forcefully in the wake of the June 2016 Orlando shooting, drawing a link between refugees and a mass murder perpetrated by an American killer. “We don’t know who they are,” Trump said about Syrian refugees. “They have no documentation, and we don’t know what they’re planning.”

Middle East scholars can add our voices to the chorus of those contesting such statements. The United States only considers Syrians for asylum after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registers them, interviews them, grants them refugee status, and chooses to refer them to the U.S. – a decision typically reserved for only the most vulnerable one percent of refugees across the globe. Refugee applicants are then reviewed by the State Department, which conducts two to three background checks and matches their photos and fingerprints to biometric security databases. Syrians then undergo one or two layers of review by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, a thorough interview with the Department of Homeland Security, a medical screening, and a cultural orientation class. Only then are they matched with an American resettlement agency, after which they undergo other security checks before leaving for the U.S. and upon arriving in the U.S. The entire process usually takes up to years.

Refugee experts point out that this screening process is already one of the most exhaustive in the world. It is difficult to imagine how it could be made more effective in catching potential security threats. We must be vigilant in pressing the question: is this really what the proposed new vetting even seeks to do? Or is it instead a guise for religious profiling, ideological testing, or other forms of discrimination?

2. Don’t blame the victim

Apart from misrepresenting the vetting process, then
President-elect Trump accused Syrian refugees of links to terrorism, declaring that they are “definitely in many cases, ISIS-aligned.” We have a role to play in making sure such unjust accusations do not crystalize as an acceptable narrative and can do so by hammering home, at every opportunity, two points. First, Syrian refugees are fleeing the terror of state violence, war, persecution, and extremists like ISIS. Who will oppose terror more than those who have suffered from it? Second, the historical record shows that no refugee has ever carried out a terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Rather, acts of terrorism in this country are far more likely to be committed by native-born citizens than newcomers. Data collected by the New America Foundation counted only 12 refugees among the 546 extremists in the United States charged with terrorism since 9/11. This rendered refugees just two percent of the total, as opposed to the 63 percent who were U.S.-born. The Migration Policy Institute examined the cases of 784,000 refugees resettled in the United States since 9/11. Only three were arrested for plotting terrorist activities, all of which concerned sending money and weapons overseas. The only connection to potential terror here at home came from one Uzbek refugee, who made unsubstantiated boasts about such attacks.

3. Keep perspective

As a candidate, Trump called “to stop the tremendous flow of Syrian refugees into the United States,” citing their numbers as reaching the “tens of thousands.” Here, we also must set the record straight. From the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 through the end of 2016, the United States resettled 18,007 Syrian refugees (nearly 90 percent of them since October 2015). This amounts to about 0.3 percent of the 5,747,239 Syrian refugees that the UNHCR reports are currently being hosted by states in the Middle East and Europe. As of this writing, there are 2,814,631 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1,017,433 in Lebanon, 655,399 in Jordan, 230,836 in Iraq, 115,204 in Egypt, and 29,275 elsewhere in North Africa, in addition to 884,461 seeking asylum in Europe, most in Germany and Sweden. These tallies include neither the unknown numbers of refugees who are unregistered, nor the 7.6 million Syrians believed to be internally displaced.

No conversation about America’s admission of Syrian refugees should pass without attention to the staggering burden being born by far less wealthy countries, and how light the U.S. share is in comparison. Those of us who know Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan can also communicate the magnitude of the crisis for these host states, given their own domestic political fissures, economic troubles, deficient public infrastructure, or scarcity of basic resources such as water. We can describe how Syrians in these countries languish in legal limbo, vulnerable to exploitation and impoverishment, and how half of the 1.5 million Syrian children are not in school. Of course, many Middle Eastern refugees who risk their lives to smuggle themselves to Europe also continue to suffer, as the asylum seekers who froze to death in early January remind us.

We can work to make these facts, figures, and stories a part of any discussion about admission of Syrian refugees to the United States. And then we can pose the question: can and should this country do more?

4. Amplify refugee’s voices

Nothing can create empathy for refugees’ plights and basic humanity, more than listening to them tell their own stories. Most Americans have never met a refugee from the Middle East. As people who know the region, speak its languages, or maintain connections to its diasporic communities, we can play a role in bridging this gap. We can invite – into our classrooms, civic groups, or congregations – people from the Middle East, be they those who have fled persecution or those who can testify why others are forced to do so. We can recommend and share any of the stunning plethora of phenomenal written, audio, and visual works in which individuals from the region bring to life the circumstances that force people from their homes and the soul-gutting challenge of starting life anew. We can incorporate these voices into our own writing, teaching, and public speaking, passing
them along to the audiences that our work tries to reach. My forthcoming book, for example, undertakes to tell the story of Syria’s uprising and war exclusively through the words of the displaced persons I have interviewed during the past four years. In these and many other ways, we can take advantage of our unique positioning to make sure that conversations about refugees actually include refugees.

Public discourse and policy-making that maligns the most vulnerable individuals and families of the Middle East is a challenge to our work generating both knowledge about and empathy for the region. Yet as vital as is our duty to advocate for and protect refugees, these remain humanitarian bandages on fundamentally political wounds. We who study those wounds can also continue to make publicly accessible what we know about the causes of war, authoritarianism, human rights abuse, and state failure in the region, including the role of the United States in creating these conditions. Promoting a deeper understanding of the region is necessary to make the refugee crisis comprehensible to ordinary Americans. And this is necessary to lay bare our moral responsibility to ordinary Middle Easterners who seek the freedom and dignity that we are lucky enough to take for granted.

Wendy Pearlman is the Martin and Patricia Koldyke Outstanding Teaching Associate Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University. Her book, We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled: Voices from Syria, will be published by HarperCollins in June 2017.
Refuge, Market, and Garden:
Tropes of Jordanian Stability among Amman’s Iraqi Residents

Zachary Sheldon, University of Chicago

Iraqis have long had a hand in shaping the political, economic, and social landscape of Amman, Jordan’s capital. In addition to visitors on tourism and business, significant migrant movements have resulted from the First Gulf War, the American invasion of 2003, and the subsequent Sectarian Civil War. More recently, the fall of Mosul to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and the conflict in Syria—which had become a second home to great numbers of Iraqis—renewed movement into Jordan. Iraqi arrivals range in circumstances from the elite of the old political and business classes to the around 61,000 registered refugees receiving aid from the United Nations. Here, I focus on middle and upper-middle class young (18-35) Iraqis who arrived in Amman after 2003, who rarely (if ever) make return visits to Iraq, and who have either been passed over or do not desire refugee resettlement abroad. Even within this group, one finds a variety of circumstances, but the prevalent view is that Jordan is a long-term home rather than a transit country.

In this memo, I will contrast three different ways of talking about the sense of national difference that all Iraqis must contend with in Jordan. Rather than presenting a model or theory to be tested or supplemented by data, I foreground a series of conversations drawn from observations made during fieldwork. These encounters show how different ways of talking about migration offer distinctive descriptions of the overall situation. Like other contributors to this volume, I believe that mass displacement in the Middle East calls for a critical reexamination of the concepts that secure the boundaries of national identity for migrants and their hosts. Yet pointing out the obvious epistemological limits of concepts like sovereignty, borders, or identity in order to offer better formulations is not the intent of this memo. Language—especially the language of politics—is not always a mirror of reality; concepts are put to use in creating the boundaries that govern difference and authorize the often-unequal relationships that arise across divides. Rather than arguing for a specific wording these concepts ought to have, this memo considers what work they do. New arrivals to Amman—whether migrants and refugees or social scientists conducting fieldwork—must navigate a dizzying variety of legal, economic, ethnic and other categories. Yet, as we shall see, national boundaries retain a curious power to subsume and obscure other forms of distinction in accounts of our shared social world.

Refuge and the Limits of Hospitality

In Jordan, state discourses of hospitality that describe Iraqi migrants as “guests” are mirrored in the ordinary language of international support for “host communities.” Consider, then, a conversation that arose when I shared a taxi with two Iraqi women last spring. Upon learning our origins, our driver began to praise the beauty of Baghdad. The older woman seemed to recognize this comment as a play on a specific genre of courteous flattery (majaamilaat) that merits a proportional response, “Yes, but things are safe and orderly (ako aman wa nitham) here.” “Thank God

1 As Geraldine Chatelard observes (2009), post-2003 migration Iraq to Jordan should be viewed not as a totally new phenomenon, but as being “embedded” within older regional migration routes shaped by long-term regional political dynamics.

2 UNHCR, 2017.

3 This perspective draws on a tradition in the political anthropology of the Middle East that focuses on the language with which people describe categories of authority and power (Assad, 1970), especially in social interactions that negotiate culturally-specific boundaries (Caton, 1986, 1987) and that are inseparable from their “ephemeral, spoken context” (Shryock, 1997:29). For a general theory of tropes in culture, see Fernandez, 1986.

4 The conversations described in this memo were conducted in a mix of Iraqi and Jordanian Arabic as well as in English. Usually, interactions involving more than two participants were in Arabic while one-on-one meetings used more English.
(alhamdulillah),” the driver replied in an appropriately humble fashion, “In Amman, we all respect one another.” He then launched into a lecture on the imperative of coexistence (ta’aiush) with all humans (bnii adam, lit. “children of Adam”), to which we passengers could only nod in assent.

We see that Although migration has placed great burdens on Jordan’s economy and infrastructure, playing host can be a source of national distinction. In its most classic form, sheltering a stranger achieves a character of grace (karama) only when it entails putting one’s own well-being at risk. And when the nation as a whole is invited by its sovereign to extend its generosity to another people, this dramatic gesture can reemerge as a small celebration of local character. All this affirms the distinctiveness of Amman as a city of exceptional stability and peace that places it alongside other great Arab capitals: Baghdadis have a beautiful city, Ammanis have a hospitable one. But just as this particular mode of relation emphasizes shared values while affirming national difference, it diminishes the socio-economic differences between the passengers and the driver that cut across national lines. To appreciate more granular distinctions between different sorts of foreigners, we must move beyond the domain of guest and host.

The International Relations of the Market

During a conversation with Ali, an Iraqi architect and real estate developer, I asked why, if he could afford to, he did not move to another country. “The life is too cheap here,” he replied, “My mother can have a maid for nothing and I can pay someone one dinar to carry my groceries home.” He then pointed to a man carrying a tray of juice towards our table, “Do you see that guy over there? He’s Egyptian, maybe someone like him is Syrian. They have no rights. They have nothing. He does something wrong, talks back to a customer, and they kick him out on the street.”

The irony of calling the city with one of the highest costs of living in the region “too cheap” should not be lost. But note how this statement specifies that the expense in question is the labor of various national others. There’s nothing new about the claim that Jordan depends upon the “external rents” of migrant capital and humanitarian aid that come with hosting refugees. Yet the business and pleasure of affluent emigrés is made possible by the exploited labor of less fortunate migrants. The blurring of legal and economic classifications is especially stark for Iraqis who are not registered as refugees, as they can only acquire work and residency permits through depositing a fix sum in a Jordanian bank. One Iraqi engineer who managed a factory outside of Amman that employed foreign workers, and who had lost and regained his permits as his own financial situation fluctuated, liked to put it to me in English: “Money talks.” And in frank voicing the privileges of wealth, Ali, the developer, spoke volumes about the value of a hypothetical Syrian’s UN-backed asylum document, let alone the Egyptian guest-worker or Sri Lankan maid who, at least on paper, have their rights guaranteed by their home governments.

For the cadre of Iraqi managers, overseers, and foremen who are reshaping the economic and physical landscape of Amman but who lack the full security of the elite, distinguishing one’s own group from other sorts of migrants plays on a dual hierarchy of class and nationality. The aforementioned factory manager noted that his company began to hire Syrian workers not only because they worked for less, but also, he said, because Syrians are an exceptionally enterprising people. Writing about class and ethnicity in the United States, the anthropologist Sherry Ortner notes that such categories do not just intersect on a case-by-case basis, but become “enfolded” in popular

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5 Shryock, 2008:408.
6 Note that Jordanians are not alone in taking pride in local hospitality and complimenting people from other places for being generous hosts. An Baghdadi meeting someone from another Iraqi province might praise the hospitality of the province’s people. This is not specific to Arab countries; Michael Herzfeld identified an identical “mode of conceptualizing cultural and political relations” between Cretan villagers and metropolitan mainland Greeks. (1985:34)
stereotypes that combine prejudicial elements of both. Based on conversations with Iraqi managers at construction sites, I suspect that the complicated matrix of ethnicity, nationality, class, and legal status that might combine in a particular individual are being similarly enfolded to naturalize (or nationalize) the hierarchical relations of capital and labor that are supporting Amman’s growth.

Better-off Iraqis are hardly alone in giving voice to these inequalities, and the enfolding of class and national difference cuts both ways. As a consultant for the Jordanian government whom I met at a conference on urban refugees told me, “There are no really poor Iraqis.” Iraqi wealth is indeed highly visible in Amman, from the neo-classical villas that firms like Ali’s build in posh neighborhoods to the Iraqi-built Royale Hotel, the tallest completed building in Amman’s skyline. But if the only role for Iraqis in Amman is as an invisible refugee or as a highly visible capitalist, where do those who fit neither description locate themselves in the city?

To Be (in) a Garden

Early in my fieldwork, I sat at one of the Fallujah-style kebab restaurants in the hilly Rabiya neighborhood as five young men and I finished off our last morsels of lamb and liver. Laith placed his hands beneath his stomach and hefted it upwards, saying “This here gut (kersh) is twenty-five kilos.” At this, the other men placed their hands around their waists to compare. “Why do all of you have a belly like that?” I asked. “We are always sitting and the only thing for us to do is eat,” said Ghazwan. “It’s because you guys are really hadiga?” I asked. Everyone laughed as another man put his arm around me and leaned in to say, in English, “Yes, we are in a garden.”

Hadiga, literally “a garden” in Iraqi Arabic, has emerged as the popular term used by young Iraqis in Amman. Although it was glossed in English as being in a garden, it is used as a predicate: “I am [a] garden” (anii hadiga). The term hadiga conveys a sense of arrested development and lack of opportunity. Even Iraqis who did not describe themselves as hadiga noted that since coming to Amman, “nothing has really happened” or that they feel like “time started passing more quickly once I got here.”

Of course, one is never really “doing nothing” and plenty of Jordanians feel frustrated by lack of economic opportunity in their own country. What, then, distinguishes a life of hadiga? Nights dedicated to hanging-out (al-ga’ada, lit. “sitting”) usually consist of smoking hookah, playing card games, and consuming food and drink. Although these activities could, on special occasions, take on the competitive and conspicuous form common to the Jordanian leisure class9 they were more typically, if reflected on at all, treated as an inconspicuous part of the routine that makes up everyday life. The desire to be inconspicuous was further reflected by the way young Iraqi men favor a specific cafe that, while located close to one of Amman’s biggest shopping districts, is tucked behind a blind turn, shielded from both the pedestrian thoroughfare and a nearby highway. There, they expect to recognize one another as fellow nationals.

In contrast to the refuge, which emphasized a binary description between migrants and non-migrants and the market, which stressed differentiating between different sorts of migrants, the garden suggests an ironic, self-deprecating distinction given by a group reflecting on its own prospects for the future. An orientation towards the future likewise obtains for relations in the market shaped as they are by unequally precarious claims to legal protections. And it informs the host whose offer of refuge is predicated on the expectation the guests will not overstay their welcome. The future is uncharted territory for a conversation on migrant communities that has primarily concerned itself with spatial origins, inherited identities, and received traditions. At a moment when the spatial boundaries of the nation-state are everywhere being called into question, what does it mean for nationality to be expressed as a collective orientation to the future?

Zachary Sheldon is a doctoral student in sociocultural and linguistic Anthropology at the University of Chicago.

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Displacement and Identity: Exploring Syrian Refugees’ Lived Experiences

Basileus Zeno, University of Massachusetts

Since the Arab uprisings of 2011, the perception of national identity among Syrians has changed radically. Many factors have contributed to this; the country became de facto divided among different groups; thousands of non-Syrian jihadists, such as the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (also known as ISIS), have succeeded in controlling large swaths of Syria and Iraq; and sectarian tensions among different segments of Syrian society have intensified with the increasing intervention of regional and global powers. By the end of 2015, an estimated 11.5 percent of the population of Syrian were dead—23 million killed or injured due to armed-conflict. More than 4.8 million Syrians have fled the country, and rough estimates show that over 7.6 million Syrians are now internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country. More than 80 percent of the Syrian population is living below the poverty line. In terms of education, the “national ratio of enrolment in primary education fell from 98 percent in 2010 to 70 percent in 2013 and further to 61.5 per cent in 2015.”

These numbers foretell a grim future. Structural challenges make any post-conflict reconstruction plans at the macro-level seems implausible in the short-run. At the micro-level, the lived experience of refugees, asylum grantees, and IDPs vary dramatically from one place to another based on where they are located. In many cases they have been displaced several times, which further complicates any planning to reweave anything that could be seriously described as a Syrian social fabric.

In this memo, I focus on “humiliation” and “dignity” as crucial aspects of the lived experience of Syrian refugees. This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork and ordinary language interviews in the United States, and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with Syrians in Germany and Turkey.

The Syrian People Will Not Be Humiliated

In December 2010, the Arab world was about to witness a series of massive, contagious social movements which would sweep across Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Morocco, Syria and other Arab countries, toppling, albeit in different ways, authoritarian leaders including Zine El Abidine Bin Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya. In almost all cases, the initial waves of peaceful protest were confronted by lethal attacks and suppression by oppressive regimes, and, in Libya, Yemen and Syria, turned into armed confrontation and eventually proxy wars leading to unprecedented waves of refugees.

On March 15, 2011, a group of young activists organized a demonstration in Damascus, chanting, “God, Syria, Freedom and that’s enough/ Allah, Souriya, Houriya w Bas,” a slogan that defied the Baathist slogan: “God, Syria, Bashar and that’s enough/ Allah, Souriya, Bashar w Bas.” Many Syrian activists consider that moment to mark the birth of the “Syrian Revolution.” Others mark the birthdate three days later, when the first activists—since known as “martyrs of the revolution”—died in southern Syria. These

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1 This memo is an excerpt of a larger ongoing project that examines meaning-making processes among Syrian refugees in exile and how statelessness is becoming integrated into many Syrians’ identity.

2 UNHCR, September, 2016; SCPR, February 2016, p.8.

protests followed a series of protests by Syrians in solidarity with the Libyan and the Egyptian people. A month earlier, on February 17, 2011, an unexpected incident happened in Damascus: a police officer brutally assaulted the son of a shop owner in the Souq al-Hariqa market. Within minutes, hundreds of Syrians gathered to protest against the security forces and shouted together, “Thieves Thieves/Haramiyeh Haramieh” and “The Syrian people will not be humiliated/ al-Sha’ab al-Souri ma Biiynthal,” a slogan that would become popular later. The minister of the interior halted the protest by promising the offending officer would be punished. Nevertheless, within hours, the video of the demonstration went viral on YouTube and Facebook.

The reason why I am referring to this slogan, “The Syrian people will not be humiliated,” is that many of my interviewees described the category of “refugee” as a “humiliating” designation, and activists/refugees in particular frequently cited that slogan as an expression of the primary motive to protest against the Syrian regime. As Reem, an activist pending asylum in the United States, puts it:

…the protest of al-Hariqa was like a scream inside the heart of every Syrian who lived in fear and had been humiliated by the mukhabarat [security forces] for decades under both Assads. I wasn’t there but when I watched the video on YouTube and heard the people chanting The Syrian People will not be Humiliated, I felt wow! I am a human being and I am proud to be Syrian. Don’t forget the timing as we were already inspired by Bouazizi. But now we are back to square one, humiliated in our country and humiliated outside it.”

When I asked another activist, Yasmeen, working with a non-violent movement based in Gaziantep, Turkey, “What does it mean for you to be a Syrian?” she remained silenced for a while before answering:

Well… I do not really know. It is a difficult question. You know I feel guilty and ashamed of being Syrian nowadays. The country has been destroyed after the revolution. I will tell you a personal example. I was lost the other day in Gaziantep. I asked a Turkish officer at the metro station about directions. He asked me about my nationality. I kept silent! I ignored his question because I thought I would be stigmatized by him if he knew I am Syrian.

Yasmeen and her sister have been refugees in Germany since June 2015. When I asked her about her new experience, she said:

I didn’t like Gaziantep because it was a conservative city in general, but I loved Istanbul. It’s my favorite city, but at the time Syrians didn’t have a clear legal status... I needed documents, I mean a non-Syrian passport because I couldn’t travel or do anything, this is why I decided to register at the UNHCR center on January 2014[...] Here, I have health insurance, I am learning the language but I hate the word refugee in German, it provokes me...why do you insist in reminding me that I am a refugee?...You don’t feel they treat you as equal and they look down on you

Similarly, Suleiman, a refugee who was resettled with his family in Massachusetts, doesn’t feel comfortable when he hears the word refugee:

No one wants to be a refugee. I even hate the word refugee or the fact that my children are refugees and that I had to flee from my country because we have someone who is killing the people and no one is

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11, and August 12, 2014. One young activist who attended the March 15 protest distinguished between the two dates as follows: “The protest of Souq al-Hamidiyeh [March 15] was organized by activists who were inspired by the Arab Spring, whereas the protests in Dar’a [March 18] were more spontaneous and led by ordinary people who wanted their children to be released immediately from Assad’s prison.”

7 The video of the protest of Souq al-Hariqa is available on the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NykGjfKn3TU

8 Mohamed Bouazizi, was a Tunisian college-educated street cart vendor, whose self-immolation in December 2010 (three months before the Syrian Uprising) sparked the wave of Arab protests.

9 Interview with Reem, Washington D.C, USA, August 8, 2014.

10 Skype interview with Yasmeen when she was in Gaziantep, southern Turkey, on September, 2, 2015.

11 Skype interview with Yasmeen, Augsburg, Germany, on January, 22, 2016.
This sense of humiliation and the negative connotation that some refugees attributed to the category of refugee shouldn’t, however, be reduced to a passive feeling or a ‘generalizable’ permanent characteristic of the experience of being a refugee. In fact, several interviewees treated humiliation dialectally by demonstrating pride in what they stood for—especially activists who frequently referred to the Syrian uprising as Thawrat al-Karama (Dignity Revolution); or in who they are by referring to Syria’s ancient history; or the hospitality of many Syrians towards other refugees in the past. While Suleiman, whom I quoted above, hates the category of refugee, he substituted it for another word in Arabic: daif (guest). This linguistic shift reflects his personal experience at the individual level, and the Syrian experience at the state level, with other refugees (Palestinian, Iraqis, and Lebanese) who fled the wars and came to Syria. According to Suleiman:

We are not refugees, we are guests. We came to America and America opened its heart to us and supported us, we want to be here positive [actors] for America[...]I want to work and do good things and to be integrated in the American society, and to transfer our Arabic civilization to the U.S.

In contrast to what the category of refugee implies (finding a new permanent home), daif signifies a feeling of temporality, expressing the desire among many Syrian refugees to believe that their time in exile is limited and once the war ends they will return “home.”

Speaking from my own experience as a Syrian in exile and as a social scientist, any attempt to study the processes of identity-formation among Syrians post-2011 and of how refugees themselves understand their displacement risks compounding the tremendous semantic violence refugees experience. To minimize this risk, it is imperative that these processes be approached in a manner that is attuned to the lived-experience of Syrians before and after the uprising, the web of meanings Syrians have themselves constructed through Syria’s contemporary history.

The Visible “Other”

The massive populations of Syrian refugees in Syria’s neighboring countries were effectively invisible in the Western media between 2011 and 2014. This reflects Hannah Arendt’s observation that “the more the number of rightless people increased, the greater became the temptation to pay less attention to the deeds of the persecuting governments than to the status of the persecuted.” Comparing to Syria’s neighboring countries, only slightly more than 10 percent of the total number of registered Syrian refugees sought asylum in Europe—yet the visibility of the Syrian refugee crisis as experienced by Western countries was exaggerated in media and political platforms, including the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Attention from European and American politicians, policy-makers and NGOs increased significantly after the images of the lifeless body of three-year-old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, made global headlines after he drowned on September 2, 2015. The images (Figure 1) galvanized public attention to a grim crisis and motivated several humanitarian organizations, aid charities and individuals to volunteer to support the new Mediterranean Sea arrivals to the Greek islands.

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12 Participant observation in West Springfield, MA, USA, on October 6, 2016.
13 Participant observation in West Springfield, MA, USA, on October 6, 2016.
16 According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the top eight nationalities of the over one million Mediterranean Sea arrivals between January 2015 and March 2016 were Syrian Syria Arab Republic (46.7%), Afghanistan (20.9%), Iraq (9.4%), Eritrea (3.4%), Pakistan (2.5%), Iran (2.3), Nigeria (2.2%), Somalia (1.2%). Retrieved September 20, 2016 from http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/documents.php?page=1&view=grid&Type%5B%5D=3&Search=%23monthly%23
Many activists and organizations appealed to the “sense of humanity” and mobilized the imagined human community to help the powerless and poor “other.” Refugees, asylees, and migrants are categories that designate homogenized groups that are represented as territorially and culturally uprooted. Ethnographer Liisa Malkki aptly criticizes such categorical mystification that rests on old essentialist and reductionist Eurocentric practices:

The universalism of the “Family of Man” depoliticizes fundamental inequalities and injustices in the same manner that the homogenizing, humanitarian images of refugees work to obscure their actual sociopolitical circumstance- erasing the specific, historical, local politics of particular refugees, and retreating instead to the depoliticizing, dehistoricizing register of a more abstract and universal suffering.17

The media attention tended to focus on Syrian refugees, but conflated refugees and migrants, and barely mentioned other nationalities or the larger numbers of refugees in non-European countries.18 The representation of the Syrian refugees, after the photo of Aylan went viral, focused on women and children as helpless, passive, and voiceless victims of violence and brutality. Despite the liberal pride of the universality of human rights, and the increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the perception of “human” and “culture” are highly territorialized and still rooted the nation-state order. The instantaneous discursive shift “against” refugees, and Syrians in particular, following the November 2015 attacks in Paris showcases how the anti-refugee stance is arguably the norm and not the exception.

The dominant media coverage and political discourse, particularly in the United States, shifted dramatically to demonize refugees and tout their potential as a grave security threat to the West. This discourse was clear when, less than two months before the U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump Jr. tweeted an image comparing Syria refugees to a popular candy, implying there were dangerous terrorists gaining entry into the United States as refugees.


18 By the end of 2015, “An unprecedented 65.3 million people around the world have been forced from home,” in other words, one out of every 113 people on Earth. Figures at a Glance, (UNHCR), Retrieved September 18, 2016 from http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

Figure 1: Aylan Kurdi, Turkey, September 2, 2015.

Figure 2: Screenshot of (anti-Syrian refugees) post tweeted by Donald Trump Jr., September 19, 2016.
Less than a year before Trump Jr’s tweet, the governors of 31 states (30 Republicans and 1 Democrat), all, but one, issued statements saying they would bar Syrian refugees from settling in their states due to security concerns fueled by ISIS attacks in Paris. While the governors’ statements were polemical rather than legal—as the federal refugee program officials formally rejected their statements—they contributed to normalizing xenophobic and anti-refugee rhetoric. Based on my interviews and my own experience, Syrian refugees and asylees in the United States have been feeling increasingly insecure and in a defensive position.

Humiliation, dignity, fear, sense of loss, sense of betrayal, insecurity, alienation, dislocation and inability to mourn are crucial to the identity-formation and meaning-making processes of refugees, and they pose methodological challenges and can only be partially represented by quantified data. Such challenges must be reckoned with by researchers who seek to gain in-depth insights into processes of resettlement and integration in hosting countries on the one hand; and how to approach post-conflict reconstruction planning concerning Syrian social fabric on the other.

Basileus Zeno is a Syrian archaeologist, currently pursuing a doctorate in Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He also serves as a Syria Page Co-Editor for Jadaliyya.

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.