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The Politics of Migration and Refugee Rentierism in the Middle East

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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The International Politics of Mobility Sanctions, University of Glasgow

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Rentierism in Middle East Migration and Refugee Politics

Marc Lynch, George Washington University and Gerasimos Tsourapas, University of Glasgow

The management of migrants and forcibly displaced populations in the Middle East has become an urgent matter for policy and academia over the past several decades. The region has long been shaped by the mass movement of people fleeing from war or seeking employment. In refugee studies, much of the literature has been shaped by the experience of the Palestinians displaced in 1948 and 1967, and then by the mass Iraqi diaspora of the 2000s and the Syrian refugees of the 2010s. A parallel literature has focused on labor migration to oil-producing states, restrictive citizenship regimes, and the Kafala system, as well as the precarities of movement from Africa into Europe.

This largely arbitrary divide in the study of human mobility, differentiating between labor and forced migration, has hidden important connections and commonalities in the governance of large-scale population movements (Hamlin 2021). Scholarship today increasingly seeks to highlight how the framing and interpretation of migration, and knowledge production on it, remains distinctly rooted in Western academic, political, and policy priorities—from concerns about destabilization and conflict diffusion in the context of Syrian or Iraqi refugees to European obsessions with the social and economic effects of migrants from the Global South (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020).

Enabling multiple literatures to enter into dialogue with one another facilitates a sharper focus on specific governance mechanisms that regulate human mobilities across the refugee–migrant divide. In the Middle East, one such key mechanism has been the concept of the *rentier state*, developed as a way of understanding how oil wealth has transformed the political economy of (primarily) the Gulf monarchies (Beblawi and Luciani 1987). Rentier dynamics have been identified across a wide range of domains and institutional sites (Herb and Lynch 2019; Fandi 2020; Al-Kuwari 2021). The concept has only recently been applied to migration and refugee practices, however, despite the vast financial flows involved and the manifestly rent-seeking behavior of both sending and hosting states.

The relationship between rentierism and human mobilities formed the core of a Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) workshop organized on 22–23 September 2023 at the University of Glasgow. The workshop sought to unpack the linkages between cross-border mobility and rentier state theory in the Middle East. How does the rentier concept apply in the context of the regulation and governance of human mobilities? Given that the hosting of forcibly displaced populations grants political actors the ability to extract revenue in a manner akin to oil rentier states via *refugee rent-seeking* (Tsourapas 2019), what broader lessons may we draw if we link migration and the rentier state? Similarly, in the case of labor migration in the Gulf, state actors delegate their 'authority over migration to private actors and turns citizens into *migration rentiers*' (Thiollet 2022, 1649). How does rentier state theory explain the politics of migrants and refugees in the Middle East? Three themes emerged in the discussion: processes of commodification in labor and forced migration, blackmailing strategies by rent-seeking actors, and intra-state variations and tensions in the pursuit of rent-seeking.

Rent-Seeking in Migrant and Refugee Commodification

Bringing the rentier concept into migration studies sheds light on the extractive nature of migration policymaking across much of the Middle East (as well as South Asia, Africa, Europe, and much of the rest of the world), which reflects a broader trend toward *migrant* and *refugee commodification*. Taking its cue from Karl Polanyi's work, the literature has recently focused on how migrants and

refugees may become objects of economic exploitation, with their futures oftentimes subject to negotiation and trade, as commodities (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021; Martin and Tazzioli 2023; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2024). This is far from a recent phenomenon, with origins tracing back to imperial and colonial practices. The focus on *rent extraction* highlights the extent to which migrant and refugee commodification has become normalized in states' domestic and international politics. In negotiations over global migration governance, economic payoffs and security concerns take center stage while humanitarian concerns and international law are sidelined (Rother, Thiollet, and de Wenden 2023). Careful examination of *rent distribution* demonstrates a complex, layered web of actors that aim to benefit from such commodification, with migrants and refugees at the very bottom.

In Parker-Magyar's analysis (2024), refugee commodification lies at the heart of Jordan's provision of educational opportunities to Syrian refugees. She demonstrates how rent extraction and distribution dictated the Ministry of Education's approach toward double-shift schools and teacher-hiring practices. Almasri (2024) examines how commodification may also become diversified across different population groups: comparing Jordan and Türkiye, she finds that nationality-based aid responses developed in both states, as they attempted to limit refugees' integration while maximizing rent. Arar (2024) takes the point of the complex nature of migrant and refugee commodification even further by focusing on the al-Za'tari refugee camp. Through ethnographic research, Arar unpacks Jordan's policy of encampment not only in terms of securing material rent but also as part of a broader strategy of curating an ambitious "narrative of reception," one that was vital in constructing the Jordanian refugee rentier state. The repercussions of such rentier dynamics are explored further in Babar's (2024) analysis of the South Asia–Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) migration corridor, where migrants find themselves "rentiered at both ends." Babar's investigation reveals the multifaceted nature of migration rentier dynamics, with state and non-state actors engaging in coercive rent-seeking behavior across both sending and hosting states.

Blackmailing Strategies of Refugee Rent-Seeking

The economic rent-seeking at the heart of the global migration regime also opens up opportunities for coercive extraction strategies. In our workshop, the *blackmailing* dimension of migration and refugee rentierism in the Middle East loomed large. This is in line with findings on how issue-linkage strategies tend to operate in the context of forced migration policymaking either in a positive or zero-sum fashion (Tsourapas 2018; Oztig 2022; Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). Here, again, a closer engagement with rentier state theory helps in nuancing assertions of causal effects in coercive migration diplomacy. Internationally, traditional oil rentier states and refugee rentier states both contain within their borders a "resource" that gives them similar leverage, with a distinct difference: non-rentiers do not desire refugees and are willing to offer material concessions to *not* obtain them. Thus, a refugee rentier state engages in *blackmailing*, not by closing its borders but by threatening to open them. Domestically, work on rentier state theory allows us valuable insights into the multiplicity of actors that are involved in rent distribution and, thus, appear empowered to engage in blackmailing behavior.

This is evident in the work of Micinski and Norman (2024), focusing on the donor side of refugee rentierism. Basing their analysis on the European Union (EU)'s external relations, they explain that refugee non-rentiers may agree to be blackmailed if this serves their domestic and foreign interests—as demonstrated in the context of the EU's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. According to Yahmi (2024), these negotiations may produce "win-win" dynamics, as in the case of Moroccan and Tunisian negotiations with the EU. Her analysis of the two North African countries' strategies around the Migration and Mobility Partnership reveals the centrality of "diplomatic-level" coercion. The case of Jordan also offers evidence of refugee rent-seeking via blackmailing on the state level, as Lupieri (2024) identifies in her research: the fear of refugees spreading infectious diseases has allowed Jordan to engage in "health rentierism," with elites combining blackmail and international appeals for solidarity in an

attempt to bolster the country's health care sector. Such strategies, Lupieri acknowledges, is not novel in the case of Jordan and, as Frost (2024) demonstrates, dates back to Jordan's engagement with Palestinian refugees. Using archival material, Frost demonstrates how Jordanian authorities were able to leverage refugee populations as a security threat to extract refugee rent from British and American sources between 1967 and 1977.

Unpacking the Refugee Rentier State

Finally, as Hertog and others have highlighted, the rentier state is not necessarily a unified actor, and the effects of rents are often distributed unevenly across institutions. Our workshop participants sought to push existing theorizations forward by *unpacking the state* in terms of the management of migrants and refugees in the Middle East. While this does not necessarily imply that state actors have been sidetracked in matters of labor and forced migration, scholarship highlights the need to historicize, contextualize, and disaggregate the "migration state," particularly in the context of the Global South (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020; Brumat and Vera Espinoza 2024). Debates within the rentier paradigm allow some insights on ways forward: in 1987, Beblawi and Luciani went beyond the state itself in speaking about a "rentier mentality," with distinct political sociology repercussions. Since then, political science has continued to examine how rent affects the complex interplay between elites, institutions, the market, and society at large (for a recent example: Eibl and Hertog 2023).

These issues have been part and parcel of the workshop's discussions, with a number of participants addressing them in different ways. In the case of Libya, Bish (2024) identifies how non-state actors and, specifically, militia groups, are able to leverage control over migration routes to supplant the state's role in refugee rent-seeking with international actors. In Irgil's analysis of Türkiye (2024), refugee rentierism has been present in far-right discourses since the Syrian refugee crisis. She analyzes the rhetoric of the Victory Party, which was able to use refugee rentierism as a key issue as it sought to reformulate the country's domestic politics. For Yassen and McGee (2024), the actions of local elites within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq demonstrate how sub-state groups engage in both material and non-material refugee rent-seeking, as they seek to provide security to vulnerable refugee communities. Dhingra (2024) argues that refugee rentierism is apparent in Jordan's subnational politics, as local officials compete for international assistance. Her interviews nuance our understanding of the refugee rentier state, as she reveals the range of strategies that local officials in refugee-dense areas adopt to pressure for state or international funds. Malit's (2024) examination of rent-seeking processes in the Gulf similarly demonstrates the importance of public–private partnerships in securing economic payoffs, as the United Arab Emirates outsources migration governance to non-state actors. Ultimately, as Worrall's (2024) analysis makes clear, an attempt to unpack rentier processes with an eye toward questions of power and influence can enhance theory-building exercises even more. In his case, he identifies the concept of non-monetary rent, which shapes GCC migration diplomacy.

Moving Forward

The POMEPS-Glasgow workshop focused primarily on the experiences of immigrants and refugees in the Middle East, conventionally defined. Yet, the complexity of human mobility suggests wider processes that have yet to be discussed: similar rent-seeking patterns may be identified in instances of emigrants and exiles, as Thiollet and Tsourapas (2024) identify, arguing for further research on dynamics of extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of income related to labor and forced migration across the wider Middle East. At the same time, the dynamics and practices identified in these papers can be observed globally. While the Middle East is a central node for both the exporting and hosting of migrants and refugees, states across the Global South practice similar forms of commodification and coercion. This collection points the way toward a broader engagement between Middle East-focused research and a wider, global discussion of the economic and political underpinnings of human mobility regimes.

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Refugee Commodification and Syrian Integration into Jordan's Public Schools

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In 2016, Jordan's Ministry of Education announced that the nation's public schools would take unprecedented steps to open their doors to all Syrian refugee students. This decision drew international acclaim, even as the Jordan Compact it accompanied highlighted quintessential rent-seeking behavior in Jordan. This type of behavior dates back to the arrival of Palestinian refugees in the earliest days of Jordan's independence (see Frost 2024). But while Jordan's status as a refugee host has remained constant, Jordan's policies toward Syrian refugees differ substantially from its responses to Palestinians. Looking at how education policies differ across refugee communities in Jordan allows for more straightforward consideration of how the "rentier concept" might "apply in the context of the regulation and governance of human mobilities" (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). For instance, whereas over 100,000 Palestinian students in Jordan attend schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) decades after refugee arrival, Jordan sought international aid to integrate Syrians into schools run by the Ministry of Education. How have subnational, within-sector opportunities for rent extraction shaped Jordan's education policies for Syria's "Lost Generation"?

As other scholars in this volume note, Jordan is a key refugee rentier state in the Middle East. Among other groups, Jordan hosts large numbers of Palestinian refugees, who arrived following the Nakba in 1948 and after 1967, and most of whom are Jordanian citizens today. Jordan later hosted large numbers of Iraqis after 2003 in addition to smaller communities from countries including Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan. In recent years, the country has hosted between 600,000 and one million Syrians—such that Syrians constitute as many as one in 10 of the total population today.[1]

The policies that structure Syrians' access to Jordan's public education system are the product of negotiations between Jordan's leadership, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and major foreign donors like the United States (US) and the European Union. There has also been influence from the advocacy efforts of Syrian communities. While we lack visibility into the precise contours of negotiations over education policy, we can analyze policies in terms of their observable influence on opportunities for "refugee commodification" from Jordan as a hosting state (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021, 2748). This essay does so firstly by contextualizing Syrian access to education amid Jordan's responses to prior waves of refugee arrivals. For example, Syrians access education through "double-shifted" public schools, where Syrians generally attend the afternoon shift. While facilitating Syrian access to education, these education policies have ensured continued Ministry of Education control over international donor resources for Syrian education while providing Jordan with strong leverage to ensure future foreign aid flows.

Secondly, this contribution engages with what other scholars have described as "rentier mentalities" around the impact of Syrian refugees on Jordan's education system. At the center of one rentier narrative is the notion that the arrival of Syrians has substantially and detrimentally impacted the quality of education for Jordanians. To do so, it leverages two novel data sources collected from Jordan's Ministry of Education, alongside interviews with teachers, bureaucrats, aid policymakers, and the Syrian and Jordanian parents of schoolchildren. The data sources demonstrate the largely negligible effects of Syrian refugee arrival on two measurable indicators of public schools' quality in areas where Syrians have enrolled in high numbers: non-Syrian enrollment in local public schools

and pass–fail rates on the national exam known as the *tawjihi.* While the arrival of Syrian refugees generated national increases in the number of Jordanians attending a double-shifted school, this did not lead more non-Syrians to leave public education for local private schools, nor did non-Syrians in these areas begin to fail the *tawjihi* at higher rates.

A Longer Lens on Refugee Education in Jordan

As with other sectors of Jordanian service provision covered in this volume, modern negotiations over Syrian refugee education—and even education provision in Jordan, broadly—are inextricable from the regime's historical negotiations with international donors and United Nations (UN) agencies, first UNRWA and then bodies like UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Developed in the wake of the 1948 Nakba, UNRWA's formation precedes the formation of UNHCR and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. UNRWA's education provision came in response to Palestinians' boycott of the agency's first major initiative—a 1950s 'Works' scheme—alongside overwhelming demand for education (Abu Lughod 1973; Irfan 2021). Perhaps because UNRWA's formation accompanied the explosion of primary education across Jordan (Kalisman 2017), education remains a large part of the organization's remit in Jordan's 10 refugee camps for Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA continues to shape education in Jordan. As of 2019, it operates an educational system for 120,000 primary school-aged students across 169 schools outside of the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Scholars often view UNRWA's education of Palestinian refugees as a technocratic success (Khalidi 1997; Irfan 2021), supporting an educated generation of students that filled labor markets in the Gulf. However, the agency is also continuously accused of undermining or perpetuating Palestinian nationalism by Palestinian refugees themselves, Arab states, Israel, or the US (for an earlier treatment, see Husseini 2000). As a result, both the Palestinian communities reliant on the body and by extension the local Jordanian economy remain perilously exposed to the whims of international donors. For instance, the US first threatened to cut UNRWA funding in 1954 (Qato 2018, 28).

Relatively little has been written about how the Jordanian regime interacts with or shapes UNRWA. Scholars often note that the Jordanian government has been deeply wary of replicating the "parallel" system for education or health care in future crises (e.g., Davis *et al.* 2017, 17). While it applies the Jordanian curriculum,[2] UNRWA hires staff almost exclusively from Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps even today. Researchers show that Palestinian staff frequently clash with the directives of the body's international leadership and the Hashemite monarchy (Farah 2009). The teachers I interviewed across Jordan often describe the trade-offs of working in UNRWA versus Ministry of Education schools. For example, while the Ministry of Education offers more job security, UNRWA teachers receive higher monthly salaries.

The global refugee system itself (Barnett 2001; Feldman 2007; Husseini 2010) and humanitarian practices in refugee education (Dryden-Petersen 2011) had evolved substantially by the time hundreds of thousands of Iraqis arrived in Jordan following the US invasion in 2003. When Iraqi refugees arrived, the Jordanian government explicitly pushed a newer model of "temporary absorption." While Palestinian refugees (see Frost 2024) and their descendants now make up a majority of Jordan's population, UNHCR operates under an agreement that refugees may no longer permanently settle in Jordan even as they are able to access public services and legal protection (Davis *et al*. 2017, 17–8). In exchange, the Jordanian government now sought direct budgetary support from donors to support the public services refugees would have access to alongside Jordanians (Davis *et al*. 2017, 17). However, it took "substantial advocacy by UNHCR and pressure to uphold the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child" for Jordanian schools to open to Iraqi refugees by royal decree in 2007 (Dryden-Peterson 2011, 45; Davis *et al*. 2017, 17). Before the decree, Iraqis had little access to Jordan's education system, which fueled fears that would echo years

later when advocates began warning of a generation of Syrian students deprived of formal education.

As part of that 2007 advocacy, UNHCR committed to supporting the Ministry of Education directly to "hire and pay salaries for 2,000 additional teachers and rehabilitated [sic] of 30 classrooms with furniture and equipment" (45). This was despite wildly disparate estimates on the number of Iraqi refugees actually in Jordan. The European Union also funded school fees for Iraqis. By then, best practice conceptualized education for refugees as "the strengthening of education systems" and the integration of refugee students in national school systems (Dryden-Peterson 2011, 47), highlighting the difficulties of disentangling technocratic demands in relation to rentier policymaking. UNHCR staff were charged with "cultivating institutional and interpersonal relationships" with national ministries to facilitate the inclusion of refugee communities within national education systems.

Although this is rarely tied to reactions to the contemporary Syrian refugee response in Europe (Micinski and Norman 2024), Jordan's hosting of Iraqi refugees followed politicized negotiations over the country's logistical support for the US invasion of Iraq. As a result, journalist Nicholas Seeley questioned "how well, or even whether" the Jordanian public schools constructed with money earmarked for Iraqi refugee students "served the target [Iraqi] population' (Seeley 2010). Like the aid to Syrians that would follow, it would remain unclear whether the education programming reflected "a hijacking" or a "a savvy political response to an already politicized aid program" that transferred "funds from an issue important to foreign donors to long-term local challenges" in Jordanian development, in the words of Nicholas Seeley at the time (*Ibid.).*

Learning Amid Syrian Refugee Arrival

When large numbers of Syrian refugees arrived in Jordan in 2012 and 2013,[3] these prior interactions informed negotiations over the entry of Syrian students into the country's national public school system. High-level negotiations between European and Jordanian political figures and the World Bank (not UN service providers nor Syrian refugees themselves) produced the 2016 Global Compact. The Compact allowed Syrians the right to straightforward entry into Jordan's public school system.[4] The terms of the agreement called for Jordan to rapidly expand enrollment of Syrians in the 2016 to 2017 school year and expand work permits available to Syrians, in exchange for benefits like increased direct budgetary support to the Jordanian government and preferential trade agreements with Europe (Barbelet *et al*. 2018). Since the agreement, Syrian refugee enrollment in Jordanian primary schools has far exceeded international benchmarks for enrollment of refugee children globally.[5]

The status quo subsequently developed of integrating Syrians *especially* into double-shift schools. Since 2016, according to Ministry of Education data, approximately 70% of Syrian students have attended the afternoon shift of a double-shifted school. This statistic includes schools in the al-Za'tari camp, where approximately 20% of Jordan's Syrian community currently resides and where all schools operate in two shifts. As of the 2022 to 2023 school year, 72.2% out of 161,000 enrolled Syrians in Jordan attended a double-shifted school.

Jordan's Ministry of Education had previously used double shifting, which is a common education practice globally, to reduce overcrowding. Before the arrival of Syrian refugees, the government explicitly identified limiting double shifting as a key indicator of progress in successive reform plans (Francis 2015). Teachers, parents, and students in double-shifted schools cite frequent concerns around shortening the school day by one hour and trouble maintaining school cleanliness.[6] In Jordan, little has been written about the specific policy mechanics behind when schools are double-shifted, and when new schools are constructed to accommodate growing populations. Interlocutors at the Ministry of Education told me that the policy currently takes effect once the number of Syrians in a school or a community reaches 100 students, with funding for the second shift directly supported by international donors.

Ten years after Syrian refugee arrival, the continued use of double-shifted schools can be seen as facilitating refugee commodification while continuing to pursue a policy of temporary accommodation. The double-shifting policy allows resources—mainly for school construction and teacher hiring—to be channeled through the Ministry of Education while limiting Syrian integration into Jordanian communities. Of course, foreign donors have long financed Jordanian public schools. Though no centralized data repository exists to specify which agencies have funded specific public schools in Jordan, activists and public sector reformers suggest that foreign donors have financed every newly constructed school in Jordan for decades. In my visits to dozens of schools across the country, principals articulated nuanced views on which foreign aid agencies—including the US, Germany, and South Korea—provided the best school construction programming. For instance, two principals separately lauded the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for hiring staffers to oversee building management for five years after the construction of a building—even as they lamented that programming would improve if USAID hired and directed those staff members in perpetuity. Because Syrian students attend an afternoon shift rather than attending their own schools or attending schools alongside Jordanians, Jordanians in these communities also benefit directly from newly constructed facilities in areas with high levels of Syrian enrollment. In my visits to double-shifted schools, teachers working in the second shift noted that Syrian students often do not themselves gain access to some of the benefits of newly constructed schools, especially science and computer labs.

Second, the Ministry of Education retains control over donor-financed teacher hiring for double-shift schools. Teaching is a substantial source of employment in areas with high levels of refugee resettlement. As Syrian teachers themselves remain barred from accessing this employment, the teachers in schools outside of refugee camps are Jordanian—a sharp distinction compared with UNRWA's programming in Palestinian refugee camps. The student–teacher ratio in Jordan has remained fixed at approximately 16:1 since 2010, according to Ministry of Education data through 2023 and previously published figures (World Bank 2016, 21). Whereas public school teacher hiring for non-Syrian schools occurs centrally at the Civil Service Bureau, individual education directorates control hiring of approximately 20,000 additional teachers to staff those in second shifts.[7] While news stories periodically reference scandals related to favoritism in hiring for those positions,[8] second-shift teachers work with the same labor rights as substitute teachers, who receive lower salaries and more limited access to health care and have more limited job security than their full-time counterparts in the morning shifts. These jobs nevertheless remain highly sought after, especially for women in rural areas where employment opportunities remain limited.

Donors continue to finance these teachers' salaries, but the second-shift system and limited tenure security for teachers place Jordan in a strong, long-term negotiating position to ensure continued international donor financing. In addition to limiting de facto integration into Jordanian communities, double-shifting policies allow Jordan to continue making its hosting policies visible in international negotiations and during visits by foreign donors. As suggested by Arar (2024), placing Syrians in a second, afternoon shift facilitates the key processes of rendering "Jordan's hosting capacity legible to the international community," who may be less likely to differentiate between Syrian and Jordanian students attending integrated classrooms.[9] As education scholars have noted, Syrians participating in a second shift are also rendered more visibly Syrian to the host community, which can lead to increased bullying and harassment.[10]

As Jordan experienced after previous refugee arrivals, donor funding for Syrian refugees is now drying up a decade into the conflict. Still, UNHCR resettlement of Syrians outside of Jordan remains extremely limited,[11] and only 0.8% of Syrians in Jordan expressed an intention to return home in the next 12 months in a recent survey.[12] In 2023, the UN World Food Programme cut the value of monthly assistance to Syrians in refugee camps by over 50%. However, Jordan educates the majority of Syrians within Ministry of Education infrastructure, even

as international donors foot the bill. Therefore, Jordan remains capable of shifting blame onto those donors if Syrians' access to quality education suffers—for instance, if second-shifted schools close due to an absence of funding. UNHCR's representative to Jordan vocalized this concern when appealing for full funding of its aid request, with news reports stating that "Jordan's ability to include refugees in its health care and education systems might be eroded" unless further funding arrives.[13]

Rentier Mentalities of Education Provision in Jordan

While refugee rentierism shapes policy implementation, a "rentier mentality" shapes narratives around how the arrival of Syrian refugees has harmed the Jordanian education system (Gatter 2023). Dhingra (2016) reports this perception succinctly, writing that "the quality of education has rapidly declined in the country's public schools due to overcrowded classrooms and overstretched resources." However, there has been relatively little analysis of the long-term consequences of Syrian refugee arrival on either Syrian or Jordanian educational attainment. I use data provided to me by the Ministry of Education on Syrian and Jordanian enrollment from 2015 through 2019, alongside *tawjihi* pass–fail rates at the school level from 2010 through 2022 (approximately 7,541 total public and private schools, of which 1,862 are public high schools).

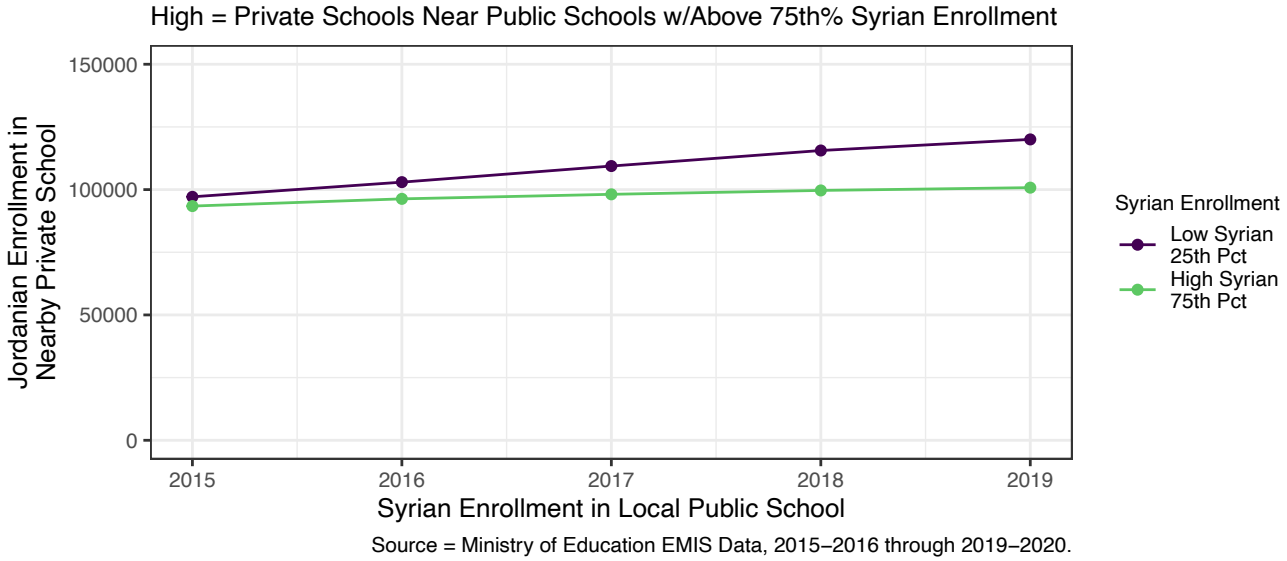
Firstly, the data highlight that while high numbers of Syrians are enrolling in primary education, very few are completing secondary education by passing Jordan's national high school exam. An earlier Human Rights Watch study found that Syrians are dropping out of Jordan's school system at very high rates. For example, while 80% of Jordanians were enrolled in secondary school in 2020, only approximately 25% of Syrian students were enrolled.[14] The data reinforce a similar impression. While Syrians constitute approximately 7% of all those enrolled in Jordanian primary and secondary education, they are just 2.8% of those passing the national high school exam. As a result, extraordinarily few Syrians are gaining the necessary credentials to complete higher education in Jordan. As one recent study highlighted, as few as 3% of Syrians in Jordan are pursuing higher education, compared with 20% in pre-war Syria.[15] Given economic barriers and a status quo in which Syrians are barred from working in most professions requiring higher education, like health care or education, it is perhaps unsurprising that relatively few Syrians are pursuing higher education.

Beyond how these integration processes serve Syrian students, the data also allow me to explore the extent to which Syrian arrival has impacted Jordanians' education. I use two available indicators that we might expect to see reflected in the data: Jordanian enrollment in private schools and Jordanian pass–fail rates on the national high school exam, the *tawjihi*. In Figure 1 below, there is very little evidence that Jordanians in communities with high levels of Syrian enrollment are leaving the public school system. Instead, those communities where Syrian enrollment is above the 75th percentile nationally—where Syrians constitute approximately 10% of all students—have actually seen less local private school enrollment than communities where Syrians have not resettled in high numbers (where they constitute fewer than 2.5% of Syrians enrolled). Analyzing pass–fail rates on the *tawjihi*,[16] In Figure 2, I similarly find no evidence that local Syrian enrollment impacted Jordanian students' performance on the *tawjihi*. Of course, these data are limited in several ways. Notably, the arrival of Syrian refugees may have longer-term impacts on education, and performance on the Jordanian national *tawjihi* exam is not a comprehensive measure of educational attainment. However, my findings echo those of a recent publication from Assaad, Ginn, and Saleh, who highlight no effect on grade completion, repetition, or entry to secondary and tertiary education among Jordanian students (Assaad *et al.* 2023). These results underscore the minimal effects of Syrian refugee enrollment on observable Jordanian educational outcomes, in contrast to the narratives that emphasize Syrians' direct, negative impact on the quality of education for Jordanians.

Scholars in this volume analyze how refugee rentierism can explain observed policy shifts in settings beyond Jordan (Worral 2024; Malit 2024). Similarly, negotiations over the policies that structure Syrian inclusion into

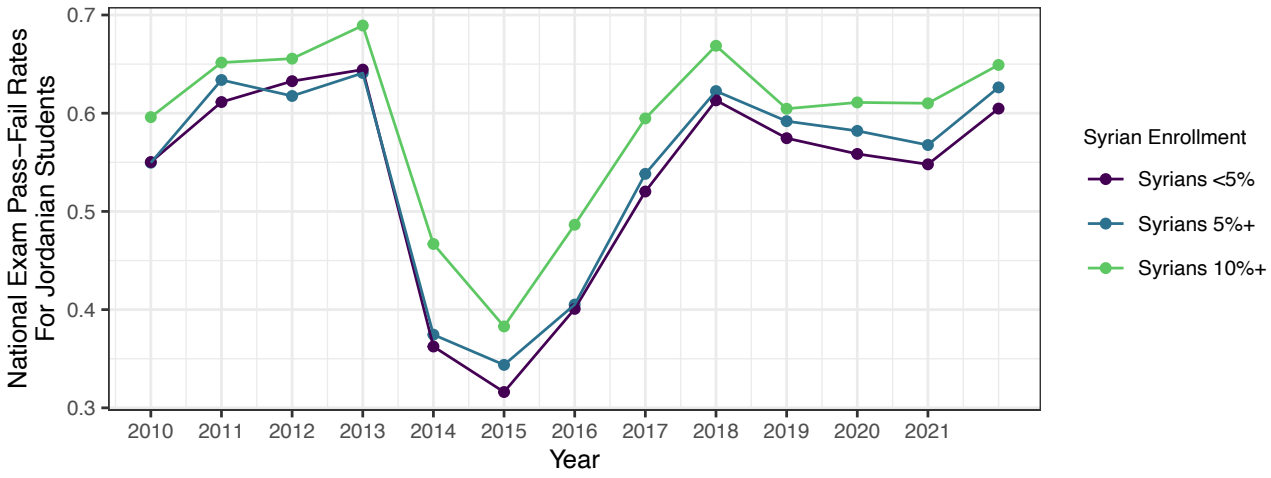
Jordanian education occur far from the public eye. As a result, it can be difficult to disentangle how technocratic considerations, contingent decision-making, or the instrumental ways states and policymakers seek to extract rents shape outcomes. This research highlights that while all three mechanisms are likely salient, refugee rentierism, commodification, and their accompanying mentalities are indispensable in understanding Syrian access to education in Jordan.

Figure 1: Relationship between Syrian public enrollment and Jordanian private enrollment



Source = Ministry of Education EMIS Data, 2015–2016 through 2019–2020.

Figure 2: Relationship between Syrian public enrollment and Jordanian national exam success



Enrollment based on overall Syrian enrollment in directorate.
Source = Ministry of Education EMIS Data, 2015–2016 through 2019–2020;
National exam data 2010–2011 through 2021–2022

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Endnotes

1 Today, Jordan also hosts smaller communities of Sudanese, Somali, and other African-origin refugees, who face high barriers in accessing public services, with education no exception.
2 UNRWA schools have taught national curricula since the organization's formation, with the exception of a brief period in Lebanese camps before the Lebanese Civil War.
3 UNHCR Syrian Refugee Response: Jordan. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36.
4 The Compact was agreed upon in 2015 and announced in February 2016 (Barbelet *et al.* 2018, 2).
5 "I want to continue to study: Barriers to secondary education for Syrian Refugee children in Jordan," *Human Rights Watch* (2020). Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/26/i-want-continue-study/barriers-secondary-education-syrian-refugee-children-jordan.
6 The majority of schools operating in double shifts before Syrian refugee arrival were located in the cities of Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa. In those buildings, the two different "schools," which have different staff and student rosters, alternate between operating in the morning and afternoon, often every other month. This system also generates concerns from teachers, parents, and students around an absence of scheduling consistency. In schools where the second shift is for Syrian students, Syrian shifts always occur in the afternoon.
7 "20,000 teachers work under the substitute teacher system," 1 October 2023. Available at: https://www.ammonnews.net/article/735378.
8 "Appointment lists spark conversations… and the Ministry of Education forms an internal investigation committee," *Husna FM*, 8 August 2022. Available at: Link.; https://www.ammonnews.net/article/735378; https://royanews.tv/news/284788.
9 See: https://www.double-shift.org/
10 Salem, H. 2020. 'Integrated but Segregated: Syrian Refugee Students' Reflections of Space in Jordan's Double-Shift Schools.' *Reach Initiative at Harvard University.* Available at: https://www.reach.gse.harvard.edu/blogs/migration-displacement/series/integrated-but-segregated.
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14 "I want to continue to study: Barriers to secondary education for Syrian refugee children in Jordan," *Human Rights Watch*, June 2020. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/06/jordan0620_web.pdf.
15 Joshua Levkowitz, "Syrian students in Jordan still betting on university," *Institute of Current and World Affairs,* 14 November 2022. Available at: https://www.icwa.org/syrians-bet-on-university/.
16 The figure presented below presents the notion that national pass–fail rates fluctuate substantially year to year according to the content of the test. These rates are highly scrutinized in Jordanian media.

Establishing the Refugee Rentier Subject:
Forced Migration, Aid, and the Politics of Integration in Jordan and Türkiye

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Following the political crisis driven by the onward movement of Syrians to European shores in 2015, Jordan and Türkiye both entered into migration partnerships with the European Union (EU). These included significant economic aid flows that eventually impacted service provision and the overall aid landscape in each of these contexts. The two migration partnerships differed in the strategies undertaken to stem the root causes of migration. The 2016 EU–Turkey Statement was framed by geopolitical positioning, given Türkiye's unique place at the borders of Syria and the EU, making it a key transit route through which migrants would attempt to reach the EU. Key concerns thus included migration management and border control (Seeberg & Shteiwi 2017). The 2016 Jordan Compact, by contrast, focused on indirect investment to forestall the prevention of onward migration (Seeberg & Shteiwi 2017). This would be more heavily influenced by investments in supporting integration prospects for refugees beyond basic needs, with a special focus on labor market inclusion and entrepreneurial support (Alhajahmad *et al*. 2018). Despite this difference, however, aid allocation and distribution mechanisms appeared to behave similarly: while both contexts are chronic hosts of refugees with acute needs, aid and inclusion programs under the scope of the Jordan Compact and EU–Turkey Statement targeted only Syrian refugee populations.

This contribution builds on new and growing literature linked to refugee rentierism as solidarity-seeking, positioning this in relation to aid and integration outcomes for refugees as targeted objects of commodification (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). As a key element of strategies for rent-seeking, refugee commodification can be accomplished through economic concessions, such as preferential loan or trade agreements, grants, or other material aid (Freier *et al*. 2021). More specifically, refugee commodification posits that particular subsets of forcibly displaced communities may become subjects of refugee rentierism, demonstrated through nationality-based access to forced migration aid in host countries. This disrupts the conventional understanding of the interplay between forced migration and international aid, namely that biases in the scale of aid responses are related to the level of displacement or political interest in the conflict. Using a comparative approach, this contribution demonstrates that, regardless of the differences in the strategies undertaken to stem onward movement of refugees, Syrian refugees were the mutually agreed focus of donor and recipient states. Integration and support measures linked with migration partnerships went beyond usual strategies in the host countries, thereby forging nationality-based restrictive responses for those outside the scope of the agreements. This contribution posits that refugee rentierism emerging from crises may be tied to a specific set of *refugee rentier subjects*, thereby—intentionally or otherwise—causing exclusionary aid and nationality-based integration responses.

The "refugee rentier subject" is defined here as the particular refugee group at the center of negotiations between recipient/host and donor states. Defining a refugee rentier subject serves two purposes: (1) it targets a single group perceived to be at risk of onward movement; and (2) it places limits on the scope of aid distribution and inclusion policies, thereby reducing the risk of creating "pull factors" to host states that have limited capacity and will to host refugees in the long term. To demonstrate the definition and impact of establishing the Syrian refugee rentier subject as an object of negotiations between EU donor states and partner governments in Jordan and Türkiye, this contribution first offers a brief background of refugee hosting in each of these countries. It then establishes how the language of migration partnerships targeted Syrians and sought to

limit their onward migration from Jordan and Türkiye to the EU. Consequently, Syrian refugees are the only targeted recipients of the migration partnerships' linked aid and development funds. This is shown by establishing how Syrian refugee access to protection and aid was facilitated and remained exclusive, and then by demonstrating the marginalization of other refugee groups that were not the subjects of refugee rentierism in the aid response.

Refugee Integration in Jordan and Türkiye

Jordan has long been dubbed a "refugee haven." At the time of writing, it hosts the highest number of refugees per capita,[1] despite not being a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (aka the 1951 Refugee Convention). Jordan is a historical host of multiple refugee communities, including Palestinians, Iraqis, Chechens, Circassians, and, more recently, Syrians, Sudanese, and Somalis (Chatelard 2010). However, long-term integration prospects in Jordan are largely shaped by the nation's experience of hosting, and fully integrating, the initial group of Palestinian arrivals, constituting an essential part of Jordan's state formation (Lenner 2020). Since this initial wave of Palestinians, limited to arrivals until 1953, Jordan has not offered clear integration prospects in the form of citizenship for refugee groups.

While Jordan's state identity is formed, arguably, at least partially by its influx of Palestinian refugees—a group still defined as a national "other"—Türkiye's nationalization has instead extended beyond the confines of its borders (Kirişci 2000). This is cemented in its 1934 Settlement Law, which, importantly, states that any person deemed to be of Turkish descent, that is, of Turkish ethnicity, may have the right to immigrate to and settle in Türkiye (Öztan 2020). Subsequent key policies adapted for the purposes of asylum included ratification of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, while maintaining European geographic borders (UNHCR, n.d.-b). It was only in 2013 that a comprehensive law addressing all foreigners in Türkiye was passed: the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (Republic of Türkiye 2013). This would include all those in Türkiye present as migrant workers, students, refugees, and those seeking international protection status. As in Jordan, however, pathways to permanent residency and citizenship would remain restricted or ambiguous.

Targeting Syrians as Refugees at Risk of Onward Movement

It was following the influx of migrants—an estimated half of whom were Syrian—to European shores in 2015 that discourse on development, integration, inclusion, harmonization, and self-reliance would start to emerge at scale in the region. Syrians were a specific population of concern, as they were a group with a high chance of being recognized as refugees and their arrival on European shores would, in many cases, mean eventual settlement.

In October 2015, the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan was proposed, supporting two aims: (1) the provision of support to Syrian refugees in Türkiye and, (2) cooperation with the aim of reducing irregular migration flows to Europe (European Court of Auditors 2018). Not long after, in March 2016, the EU–Turkey Statement would be agreed, which supported migration cooperation between Türkiye and the EU. This included a "one-for-one" provision that would support the resettlement of one Syrian refugee to Europe in exchange for every Syrian returned to Türkiye. Tied to this is the financing of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT). Established in January 2016, FRiT was a fund that managed an initial offering of €6 billion to support refugee hosting and migration management responsibilities. Similar discussions took place in Jordan around the same time. For instance, the 2015 Jordan Response Plan was the country's first attempt at bridging the humanitarian and development aid divide, with an increased focus on self-reliance (Government of Jordan 2015). This would be followed soon after by the labor and trade-focused Jordan Compact in February 2016.

The Jordan Compact was framed as "turning the Syrian refugee crisis into a development opportunity," stressing the focus on Syrians in the Jordanian context to support their employment and reduce incentives to seek asylum in Europe ("Western Leaders Use Financial Incentives

to Keep Refugees in Jordan," 2016). The EU–Turkey Statement also specifies only Syrians in the resettlement clause of the statement, stating, "For every Syrian being returned to Türkiye from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Türkiye to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria" (EuroParl, 2016).

The clear commonality throughout these discussions was the focus on Syrian refugees as beneficiaries of aid and, therefore, their host states as aid recipients. As the key migratory group, and one whose movement had some level of legitimacy because of the conflict in Syria, refugee support to the region was largely conflated with support to Syrians specifically. It was through such migration partnerships that a mutually convenient focus on Syrians would culminate in nationality-based refugee rentierism. In other words, not all migrants and refugees would benefit from arriving aid, as only a singular group was deemed as a beneficiary of the refugee rent to be extracted.

Syrian Refugee Rentier Subjects as Preferred Recipients of Refugee Protection

Differentiation began when refugee status was determined. As major hosts of refugee and migrant movements, Jordan and Türkiye enacted a level of selectivity in refugee recognition. In their initial years of refugee out-migration, Syrians were broadly recognized as a group with "refugee character" (see Jackson, 1999). That is, movements of Syrians seeking refuge were generally recognized to be for legitimate reason and in compliance with the definition of persecution defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. This was demonstrated not only through (initially) open borders to neighboring countries (Ferris 2013; UNHCR 2013), but also through relatively high recognition rates in Europe as well as increased rates of resettlement to third countries (Szucs 2023). Therefore, in the initial years of arrivals in Jordan and Türkiye, Syrians were awarded an ambiguous guest status in both states until the enactment of the Temporary Protection regulation in Türkiye (UNHCR n.d.-c) and a circular awarding Syrians temporary Ministry of Interior Service Cards (MoI cards) in Jordan (NRC 2016). In both cases, Syrians would not undergo refugee status determination procedures, in part due to the scale of the movement and in part due to political positioning vis-à-vis Bashar al-Assad and, soon after, his Russian allies.

Simultaneously, Türkiye and Jordan were, and continue to be, hosts to various migrant and refugee groups. In particular, groups that may be widely present as refugees elsewhere—such as Afghans, because of their significance in primary workforce occupations—may reside mostly as migrant workers in Türkiye (Almasri 2023b). In Jordan, the largest migrant worker group continued to be Egyptians. Much like Afghans in Türkiye, Egyptians would increasingly be marginalized and targeted following the narrow, nationality-based policy and program developments made in the wake of the Syrian refugee influx and the associated refugee aid programs that would subsequently emerge (Almasri 2023a). The language of these agreements differed in their focus on supporting labor inclusion and integration. In Jordan, there was more explicit focus on Syrian refugee labor inclusion in the aid targets set in a World Bank concessional loan program tied to the Jordan Compact outcomes (World Bank 2021). Türkiye's aid programs did not specify issuance of work permits, however only Syrian refugees are mentioned as beneficiaries in integration efforts and other areas, as detailed in Türkiye's World Bank Country Partnership Framework (World Bank 2017).

While the Temporary Protection regulation would afford Syrians residency in Türkiye with minimal procedural and administrative delay, those seeking international protection status would face increasingly challenging hurdles. These hurdles became more difficult after 2018, when Türkiye's Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM), now called the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), took over responsibility for international protection refugee status determination and registration from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR). As of 2018, civil society organizations have reported that single Afghan men, in particular, have faced challenges in acquiring international protection status, with one claiming that there have been no registrations of this group since

(Almasri 2023b). This disproportionately affects Afghans in Türkiye collectively, as Afghan men often arrive independently due in large part to the dangerous routes they are obliged to take to reach the Turkish border. Meanwhile, in 2019, the DGMM, with the support of the UNHCR and the EU, undertook a Syrian refugee status verification exercise to ensure their regular status.

Accountability for these refugee populations also differed: as these groups existed outside of rent-awarding and rent-seeking discussions between recipient and host states, there was little advocacy on their behalf at the international level. Civil society organizations and advocacy groups have provided support to some extent, however not at the level of collective organization observed for Syrian refugee protection and inclusion measures (Bjerg 2022; Frelick 2022). While accusations of refugee deportations are defended by the DGMM, deportation numbers of Afghan *migrants* are instead exaggerated in some instances (Verma 2018).[2] Conversely, it may have been in the EU's favor to support the return of Afghans from Türkiye to discourage perceptions of onward movement to Europe; European countries infamously deported Afghan refugees during this period after some member states classified Afghanistan as a safe country.

In these acts, one can observe the process of legitimizing and delegitimizing refugee presence as linked to receipt of refugee aid. The Turkish and Jordanian governments extracted aid in exchange for policy concessions for Syrians. While this practice does not independently marginalize other groups present, it does make them comparatively less desirable, as little aid and integration support is being directed toward them. Aid extraction for these groups, in any case and at this stage, is undesirable—or perhaps unfeasible—for both recipient and donor governments.

Limiting Aid and Labor Inclusion to Syrian Refugee Rentier Subjects

While aid programs would expand sectoral foci targeting Syrian refugees and local host communities, minority refugee groups, Palestinian refugees, and migrants would all be marginalized in various ways. In both Jordan and Türkiye, it would be years before non-Syrian refugees would be actively included in key cash distribution programs. Non-Syrian refugees—or, more specifically, those holding international protection status—were only included in Türkiye's European Social Safety Net cash distribution program in 2018, after its launch in 2016 (Almasri 2023b). In Jordan, non-Syrian refugees would be included in the World Food Program's flagship food voucher distribution in 2019, some six years after the program was introduced (Baslan & Williams 2021). These programs are not only a key source through which refugees can meet their basic needs, but they also act as a deterrent for engaging in negative coping strategies, including withdrawing children from school, child labor, and early marriage (UNHCR 2021b). The selective issuance of such cash aid programs thus forged differentiated integration and wellness capacities for refugee groups by nationality (Mennonite Central Committee 2017).

Labor inclusion was also a significant component of the Jordan Compact. To realize the aims of the Compact, the government initially opened up work permits across a number of sectors, primarily agriculture, manufacturing, and construction (UNHCR, n.d.-a). While Syrian refugees demonstrated interest in obtaining work permits, there was little incentive to be bound to a single employer, particularly for work that was seasonal or temporary in nature, such as agriculture or construction (Stave *et al*. 2021). In response, the Government of Jordan de-linked work permits from employers, first in the agriculture sector and then in the construction sector, thus allowing Syrians to acquire work permits independently (International Labour Organization 2017). This not only gave laborers independence from their employers, but it also reduced fees: work permit fees were waived for Syrian refugees in these sectors.

While Syrians would have access to relatively cheap, accessible work permits that would not be employer-bound, this courtesy would not be extended to non-Syrian refugee and migrant populations (Almasri 2021).

Practically, however, to earn an income, many refugee households would need to seek employment, especially if they were not receiving any form of cash or in-kind assistance. Non-Syrian refugees looked for informal jobs in precarious sectors, including agriculture and construction work, that offered daily wages. To legally gain employment, non-Syrian refugees would need to be sponsored by an employer, much like other migrant workers. However, as they were already present in Jordan, this would prove to be challenging, as a key function of these work permits was to import labor. For those that did manage, however, this practice would soon be prohibited: in mid-2018, the dual status of asylum seeker and migrant worker would be banned, forcing an asylum seeker to surrender their status in the event of pursuing legal employment (Waja 2021). Complicating matters further, in mid-2019, following a Jordanian government cabinet decision, the UNHCR would be restricted from performing new refugee status determination procedures on any asylum seekers that entered Jordan on any of a tourist, student, or medical tourism visa. This prevented all new non-Syrian arrivals from registering for asylum seeker status at all.

Simultaneously, repercussions for anyone working informally would be made more severe: increased penalties for hiring and engaging in informal work were endorsed by the Council of Ministers in 2020 (Jordan Times 2020). Soon after, the Government of Jordan began a campaign of surprise inspections on worksites to ensure compliance with work permit issuance for all foreign workers. These inspections have continued since, with (at the time of writing) the most recent taking place in July 2023 (Jordan Times 2023). Repercussions for those deemed to be in violation of the regulations include financial penalties, detention, and deportation of informal non-Syrian foreign workers, among them non-Syrian refugees. Yet, as noted earlier, public advocacy for non-Syrian labor inclusion is limited: as work permit issuance for Syrian refugees was tied to outcome-based aid indicators, program and associated policy influencing from the international and humanitarian community would be largely restricted to such indicators and targets, with very rare exception.

While Türkiye's partnership with the EU was similarly limited to Syrian refugees, its link to development and labor indicators was more tenuous. Using a "blackmailing" strategy, Türkiye made use of its geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis Europe, wherein border control (or lack thereof) could facilitate increased flows of migrants and refugees who wished to migrate to the EU. Aid was therefore limited to mainly basic needs and, more critically, to infrastructure investments. However, the second tranche of FRiT, disbursed in 2018, had arguably more focus on the socio-economic conditions of refugees. Projects still crucially focused not only on infrastructure but also on skills-building and employment pathways (KAYIST, n.d.), albeit this expansion remained restricted to the rentier subjects initially targeted. The EU and Türkiye facilitated the legal employment of Syrian refugees by relaxing the requirement that foreign workers should earn minimum wage, by lowering foreign employment quotas, and by supporting social security payments for Syrian workers through the Transition to Formality Programme (KIGEP) implemented by the International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization, n.d.). Notably, while non-Syrian holders of international protection status also had a work permit law available to them, KIGEP would and continues to be restricted to supporting Syrian refugees. This also meant that programs dedicated to supporting legal refugee employment were restricted to Syrian refugees. As a key element of integration in a host country, exclusion from legal work marks a key aspect of differentiated integration resulting directly from refugee rentierism focused on a specific group.

The EU FRiT expanded to include non-Syrian beneficiaries in 2018. However, a type of path dependency had been created in the years prior, as many UN partners and organizations had already established relations with Syrians. Also, according to some civil society organizations, it was the preference of the Turkish government to limit programs to Syrians (Almasri 2023b). The impact of this is clear in implementation statistics: as of December 2021, less than 4% of refugee beneficiaries in the protection sector of UNHCR funding are from countries other than Syria. Holders of international

protection status, some of which may also be Syrian, made up only 4% of Livelihoods sector refugee beneficiaries in 2021 (UNHCR 2021a). As of January 2022, only 51 of 105 of the UN's implementing partners in Türkiye reported working with or having identified the needs of refugees from countries other than Syria (ibid.).

Ongoing Realities and Future Implications

EU aid to Jordan and Türkiye has served a clear aim: to limit onward migration to Europe. As a crisis response, this aid has targeted the largest and generally accepted as "legitimate" moving refugee group, as evidenced in temporary protection protocols in the region and high recognition rates in the EU. While this should not independently limit the inclusion of minority groups, it has established Syrians as the subject of distinctive refugee rentier behaviors not available to others. In turn, Syrian refugees were valued over other groups in the initial years of aid responses following the agreement of partnerships with the EU. Accordingly, this has motivated biases in policy and programs that exclude non-Syrian refugee groups. In some instances, as in Jordan's targeting of non-Syrian labor, it could be argued that such exclusion deliberately marginalizes non-Syrian vulnerable groups.

While heavily criticized in the early years for targeting Syrian refugees, EU migration partnerships in the context of the Syrian crisis have also affected untargeted populations in host/recipient countries. Syrian refugees were targeted initially to stem onward movement, however in practice the majority of refugees in countries of first asylum tend not to migrate. This targeting also directly correlates with aid provision that addresses refugee needs, education, and labor integration. Hence, groups not perceived as being at risk of mass onward movement were neglected as they fell outside the scope of aid programs. This contribution thus demonstrates that the practice of targeting particular groups is an important element of contemporary refugee rentierism.

As Jordan and Türkiye approach their 12th year of hosting Syrian refugees, there are increased to return migrants, including refugees, to their home countries. While aid in Jordan was initially meant to support refugee self-reliance, poverty and unemployment rates at the time of writing are higher than ever. Thus, despite renewed donor interest, host governments are reluctant to expand current aid programs to non-Syrian refugees, fearing the creation of additional pull factors.

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Endnotes

[1] This figure includes United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) registration figures.
[2] The status of Afghan refugees and migrants in Türkiye are often conflated.

Marketing Jordan's Refugee-Hosting Capacity

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Jordan is likely one of the strongest cases for exploring and expanding the concept of *refugee rentierism* (Tsourapas 2019; Tsourapas 2022; Frost 2024; Almasri 2024; Lupieri 2024; Parker-Magyar 2024). Not only has it been a safe haven for numerous refugee groups that arrived from throughout the region, but the country's economy has also depended greatly on external aid, even before gaining independence. In 2023, approximately 25% of Jordan's population was registered with the United Nations (UN). Jordan depends on foreign aid to manage the needs of refugees on its territory, as is the case with many Global South states where the majority of the world's refugees live. Hosting a large number of refugees on state territory is not a sufficient condition for a state to successfully engage in rent-seeking. States often need to market their *refugee-hosting capacity*, in which hosting and containment are intertwined. The value of a state's refugee-hosting capacity can change from one year to the next, even when the number of refugees hosted remains constant or fluctuates only slightly.

The global status quo may be understood as a "buyer's market." Powerful states in the Global North pay states in the Global South to receive most of the world's refugees. When the status quo is challenged—as was the case in 2015 and 2016 during the "European refugee crisis"—a "seller's market" may emerge. Unable and unwilling to provide a comprehensive response to the influx of displaced people, European leaders abandoned *burden sharing* among European states and instead leaned into a strategy of *burden shifting*, turning to states in the Global South to maintain the distribution of the world's refugees. Recognizing their increased market value, Southern hosts can leverage their refugee-hosting capacity through rent-seeking, as was evident in Jordan through the 2016 Compact.[1] Once the exogenous shock has subsided, the buyer's market returns. In the years that followed the Compact, Jordan's refugee-hosting capacity attracted fewer rents because European states no longer faced the same level of urgency.

A "buyer's market" incentivizes the need for promotion, even when the goal is to stem losses rather than seek to turn a profit. A Southern host can preserve the value of its refugee-hosting capacity through manufacturing visibility. In Jordan, curated stories and images from the al-Za'tari refugee camp have allowed state officials to continue their rent-seeking practices. Al-Za'tari has played the role of a public relations (PR) camp. As one of the most photographed camps in the world, images from al-Za'tari allowed the state and UN to display their humanitarian achievements. The act of marketing and selling a state's refugee-hosting capacity runs the risk of objectifying refugees. Practices intended to maintain visibility can also have negative impacts on refugees because they disincentivize full incorporation. If refugees are permitted to fully integrate, including obtain full legal incorporation, it may become more difficult for the host state to secure external support. Meanwhile, refugee rentier state designations may risk Orientalizing MENA host states by implying that states seek to turn a profit through the objectification of refugees. Examinations of rent-seeking should be contextualized within the global system of refugee management in which powerful states in the Global North have created the conditions in which Southern states are incentivized to market their refugee-hosting capacity.

Refugee Rentierism

Rentierism—rent-seeking behavior—can influence economic, political, and social relationships across various states and within a country. The rentier state concept was developed to explain the windfall gains of oil-rich Gulf states that achieved great wealth in the 1970s and whose economies subsequently became dependent on these external funds. Oil was theorized as an "unearned" good which garnered capital that was external to the state, benefiting elites and the governments of states that controlled access to lucrative natural resources. The term "unearned" is meant to be value-neutral—what Beblawi

called "a reward for ownership" (1987, 383). Rents may be contrasted with other forms of income such as wages or profits. Each of these characteristics provides an axis of analytical leverage to examine the emergence of refugee rentierism.

As Thiollet and Tsourapas explain, refugee rentierism is a form of migration rentierism, which is defined as the "socio-economic and political resources that are derived either from controlling the movement of people into, across, or out of countries, or from the exploitation of the labour, identities, and lives of (forced) migrants" (2024, 2). The rents in this case are not imagined as natural resources, as envisioned by Beblawi (1987) and Mahdavy (1970), but as the "external rewards" that a state may gain from out-migration and in-migration, such as the acquisition and taxation of remittances. Migration rents may also include non-pecuniary rewards, as Worrall (2024) discusses regarding visas. Rents may also come in the form of pledges and other concessions that could benefit the state's economy.

The migration literature has largely focused on theorizing reception in "countries of immigration," with an emphasis on labor migration to the Global North. Turning our attention to refugee reception in the Global South, a burgeoning literature theorizes reception in countries of *forced* immigrants. Refugee-hosting poses notable challenges for receiving states. Countries that share a border with neighboring conflict-affected states may accept hundreds of thousands of people over a short period of time. While a timeline allows scholars to map catalysts of displacement, reception cannot be pinned to the start of the war because people continue to cross borders in search of safety as the conflict expands inside the home country, new groups are affected or directly targeted, the impact of weapons changes, social institutions further deteriorate over time, pushing more people to flee, and the level of international aid waxes and wanes (Arar and FitzGerald 2023). The rate of displacement compounds the challenges of refugee governance, including facilitating access to basic needs such as food and shelter, as well as providing refugees with adequate health care and education.

Who should be held responsible for providing refugees with the support they require? Among the various implications of this moralistic question, financial issues are paramount. Who should pay—who *will* pay—for the costs of refugee-hosting? How do such financial obligations shape the politics of refugee reception, refugees' access to rights, and the hosting practices of states that take in refugees? Ostensibly, refugees are the responsibility of the international community. In practice, however, the ultimate responsibility falls upon host states that accept refugees onto their territory, even though they usually do not contribute to the causes of their displacement. It is within a global system, in which powerful states exercise robust strategies to control refugees' movement, that rent-seeking practices emerge among leading refugee host states, including Jordan.

Refugee-Hosting Capacity

At the time of writing, Jordan is among the top refugee host states in the world. Modern Jordanian society has been described as a mosaic, reflecting a country that is home to people of different nationalities and ethnic groups whose belonging as part of the nation includes distinct ethnic identities. Ethnic minorities, including Circassians, Chechens, and Armenians, have been part of Jordan's story since before the country's inception. Jordan gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1946. The country's proximity to Palestine, the drawing and re-drawing of borders that included the annexation of the West Bank in 1950 and the disengagement in 1988, have led to a unique relationship between Jordan, Palestine, and the peoples that inhabit these territories (Frost 2022). In 2024, more than 2.3 million Palestinians in Jordan were registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the majority of whom have Jordanian citizenship despite being UN-recognized refugees. Conflicts in the region have led to the mass displacement of other groups who have sought sanctuary in Jordan. Iraqi refugees entered Jordan during the first and second Gulf wars in 1991 and 2003 respectively. In 2011, the war in Syria led to the displacement of approximately half the country, with

more than 650,000 people registering with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Jordan. Government estimates of the number of Syrians who resided in Jordan were almost double UN counts. Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians have been the largest refugee groups, yet they do not constitute all of Jordan's refugee population. Approximately 20,000 Yemeni, Sudanese, and Somali refugees were also registered in Jordan in 2023 (UNHCR 2023a).

Rent-seeking as a strategy for refugee management gained prominence when Syrian refugees changed the stakes of the global refugee assistance regime in 2015, after more than one million refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers arrived in Europe. European state leaders considered a strategy of *burden sharing* across European countries but ultimately recommitted to *burden shifting*, transferring the responsibility for refugee hosting and containment abroad to states in the Global South. Jordan and other host states that found themselves in a similar position were able to leverage refugee-hosting on their territory in exchange for increased aid and greater concessions from richer Global North states (Arar 2017; Freier *et al*. 2021; Tsourapas 2022; Micinski 2023). Jordanian officials found themselves in a "seller's market," able to ask for more concessions from European "buyers" who were ready to invest in refugee-hosting, and containment, abroad. Importantly, the funds and pledges paid to Jordan were not a direct response to the number of individuals fleeing Syria. Before 2015, millions of refugees were already displaced to neighboring states; it was only when the global status quo was severely upset that Jordanian officials were able to better advocate for increased external funds.

Jordanian rent-seeking successes were not solely compensation for the actual number of Syrian refugees who were hosted on state territory. If that were the case, one would expect that rents would directly reflect the size of refugee populations, increasing proportionally with estimated need. Approximate numbers demonstrate that UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees in Jordan increased gradually over the years: 623,000 (2014), 628,000 (2015), 648,000 (2016) (Refugee Data Finder n.d.). Despite this gradual increase, Jordan was able to secure windfall rents with the 2016 Jordan Compact, which included $700 million in grants annually for three years and $1.9 billion in concessional loans (Barbelet *et al*. 2018). The inconsistent relationship between external funds and the number of refugees hosted in Jordan can also be observed on the opposite side of what has been called the "European refugee crisis." In 2023, Jordan hosted 695,821 UNHCR-registered refugees (all refugee nationalities except for Palestinians). Rents, however, did not steadily increase to reflect refugee numbers and subsequent need. While in the wake of Ukrainian displacement the UNHCR "received record support," UNHCR operations in MENA garnered $110 million less in 2023 than the year before (UNHCR 2022; UNHCR 2023b). That same year, Jordan operated with a critical funding gap of $82 million (UNHCR 2023c). As Dominik Bartsch, a UNHCR representative, explained:

> "The current lack of funding for the refugee response is undermining the great achievements made in over a decade. […] Now there is an imminent risk that the situation is sliding back into a humanitarian crisis with serious consequences for refugees and host communities" (UNHCR 2023b).

Refugee rents in Jordan are not a direct reflection of the actual numbers of refugees who reside on the state's territory, the vulnerability of refugees, or the needs of host community members. Jordan's refugee-hosting capacity was less marketable when the status quo was reestablished; a "buyer's market" took hold once again.

Rents reflect Jordan's ability to market and sell its *refugee-hosting capacity*. Following Jacobsen (1996), a community's refugee-hosting capacity reflects its ability and willingness to host refugees. Refugee-hosting capacity—as a good or service that can be sold in exchange for rents—must be further interrogated by scholars interested in refugee rentierism. The "willingness" aspect requires unpacking. What are refugee rentiers willing to provide to rent payers who are investing in refugee deterrence? First, refugee-hosting and containment are intertwined. Refugee rents are tied to immigration control. Major refugee host states

do not simply welcome refugees onto their territory; they also limit their movement onward to other states. FitzGerald (2019) describes an "architecture of repulsion" in which the rich democracies of the Global North seek to keep would-be refugees out. "Caging" is the practice of keeping refugees in their country of origin or in neighboring states, such as Jordan. Containment may be coerced through border control measures, or incentivized through policies that facilitate local incorporation. The 2016 Jordan Compact outlined rents that would be offered in exchange for services and benefits that Jordanian officials agreed to provide to Syrian refugees, including access to the labor market and school enrollment for Syrian children. Opportunities for employment and education can incentivize settlement because they promote refugee integration (Arar *forthcoming*; Arar 2023).

Beblawi (1987) explains that the concept of the rentier state did not emerge ex nihilo but was advanced by scholars to address global changes and elucidate emerging economic developments that resulted from oil in the Arab states. Mañé-Estrada and Albinyana (2023) urge scholars to consider how the changing needs of the global economy influenced the emergence of rentierism: "Lack of context leads to the idea that *rentierism* is the result of the individual choice of OPEC [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries] members […] which gives way to an 'Orientalist' conception," the authors explain (2023, 38). Jordan's rent-seeking strategies also did not emerge in isolation. Neglecting the international context in which Global North states pay into the "grand bargain" to keep refugees at bay runs the risk of Orientalizing MENA state behaviors. As Micinski and Norman (2024) demonstrate, there is a donor side of refugee rentierism that must be critically analyzed. Global North rent payers invest in refugee deterrence and play a central role in refugee rentierism.

Rentiers or Entrepreneurs?

Rentiers may be juxtaposed with entrepreneurs. The comparison hinges on the assessment of "unearned" rewards. Unlike rentiers, entrepreneurs earn their profits by engaging in "dynamic, innovative, risk-bearing" behavior (Hassen 2020, 191). Given that refugee-hosting calls upon the state to make calculated risks and search for innovative ways to manage refugee reception that change over time, may scholars imagine host states as *refugee entrepreneurs*?

Rent-seeking can yield lucrative rewards, yet there is a competing calculation to consider. The comprehensive costs of hosting are usually unknown and unbounded. Refugee reception costs the state money even when refugees' needs are not met. Strains on infrastructure and social services take a financial and psycho-social toll on the state and society. Sustainable housing, protection, access to health care, and programs such as cash assistance require money. While international funding and pledges are debated each year, the host state is less likely to consider mass expulsion on an annual basis, although there are many examples of forced or coerced returns.

The determination of costs and gains to the refugee host state cannot be assumed. To make an assessment, calculations must impose temporal boundaries. The reality is that most states in the Global South host refugees for generations and most refugees in MENA live in protracted situations. Cost–benefit calculations may also take into consideration the diversion of funds. Should funds that the Jordanian state would have received for development aid or through other investments, when diverted, count as refugee rents? How might refugee reception impact other sectors of the national economy? How may scholars consider the loss of revenue when war interrupts or halts trading with a neighboring state, as was the case with Jordan and Syria? Calculations are further complicated when considering how refugee rents may privilege some sectors of the economy, and some individuals, over others.

Unlike oil or other natural resources, refugees are agentic beings. They contribute to the economy in many ways. In the traditional sense, refugees make and spend money in their host state. They bring wealth with them, benefit from remittances received from abroad, and send money to loved ones back home. As state officials engage in

negotiations at global forums, refugees also bring money into the state through their connections, advocacy, and organization (Khoury and Scott 2024). To parse the income generation or spending requires further empirical analysis. While "there is no such thing as a pure rentier economy" (Beblawi 1987, 384), these points gesture to the importance of considering multiple and intersecting forms of migration rent-seeking. Declarations of a *refugee rentier state* may be called into question by these complicating factors even while rent-seeking and a migration rentier mentality are evident.

Making Refugee-Hosting Visible

The ability and willingness to host refugees is not sufficient for securing rents. Host states are incentivized to make their refugee-hosting capacity legible to the international community. The Jordanian government depends on the visibility of some Syrian refugee camps to raise aid money for the plight of refugees on its territory. Curated stories and images from the al-Za'tari refugee camp, the largest camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan, play an oversized role among an array of efforts that state actors put forth to remain visible to donors and justify the need and use of rents.

Jordan established the al-Za'tari refugee camp in the northern desert. Creating an "instant city" in the desert was a harrowing task. Conditions one year after the camp was established were untenable for many refugees. "We've accomplished so much, but the needs are simply tremendous," said UNHCR representative Andrew Harper (Beals 2013). The rugged determination that it took to build al-Za'tari is not visible in representations that have come to characterize one of the most photographed camps in the world. Photographs depict a wide range of activities, although some reoccurring themes emerge. Familiar images of refugee children include photographs taken through chain-link fences or children sitting in a crowded classroom, often smiling directly into the camera. Boys with unkempt hair are photographed playing soccer; girls with bright eyes convey a sense of innocence. Refugee women are photographed making things: sewing clothing or crafting. These images are often paired with human interest stories produced by the UN, humanitarian agencies, and in the media. Pieced together, they suggest a sense of humanitarian success—that living "in a country of UNHCR" is a reasonable resolution to the urgent precarity of dispossession and displacement (Kagan 2011). Human interest stories depoliticize the needs and desires of refugees by making their lives look palpable to the outside observer. Some investigations examine important social issues, such as increases in early marriage, but the critiques condemn refugees' behaviors and practices, not the refugee system, the host state, or humanitarian organizations. Refugees are not treated as political actors with the right to organize and protest systemic inequality—although they do, often off camera. Instead, refugees are portrayed as grateful aid recipients, patiently waiting for their chance to return home or be resettled.

Curated narratives from camp settings make humanitarianism and humanistic treatment visible. Governing entities become the heroes of such stories. Jordan can be lauded for its charitable treatment of Syrian refugees, and the UNHCR can celebrate its successes, achievements that are made possible with the support of donors and the international community. Flags from countries around the world appear throughout the camp, such as on the exterior of schools and hospitals, to recognize the contributions of donors. UN emblems are stamped onto countless goods: tents and housing units, schoolchildren's backpacks, food rations such as bags of rice, and the sides of portable toilets. Due to the accessibility of refugees and the visibility of humanitarianism in camps, refugees living in camps are more likely to have contact with journalists, politicians, and scholars than refugees living outside of camps.

Images of camps can reinforce who refugees are in the global public's imagination and implicitly convey where refugees are "supposed" to live—in camps in the Global South. Curated stories about refugee-hosting imply that there is no reason to disrupt the status quo by increasing refugee reception in the Global North because funding their settlement in UN-run camps is a satisfactory

solution. In stark comparison, images of asylum seekers in Global North states, including those taken in refugee camps such as Moria in Greece or Calais in France, often convey chaos and give the viewer an unsettling feeling. All photographs reflect an aspect of displacement, but the overrepresentation of certain visual compositions collectively convey an incomplete, yet strategically rendered, version of reality that interested parties may work together to uphold.

Because Southern hosts are placed in a position to continuously advocate for international pledges and donations, visibility allows state actors to demonstrate the value of their refugee-hosting capacity, including their ability to provide humanitarian support while facilitating immigration control. However, incentivized visibility may also have negative consequences for refugees. Refugees-turned-citizens will no longer be the responsibility of the international community. Comprehensive refugee integration, including access to social, political, and legal incorporation, would require that the state forfeit rents. Rent-seeking, therefore, may incentivize the objectification of refugees.

Cautioning Against Objectification

People are not objects. Rent-seeking, however, runs the risk of objectifying refugees by turning them into bargaining chips. As scholars investigate rentierism, they too are in jeopardy of amplifying refugee objectification if they uncritically adopt state perspectives. When refugees are envisioned as objects, the agents that exact violence or persecution against them may subsequently be relieved of critical reflection. Yet, every aspect of displacement was the result of agentic decision-making, whether the focus is on fleeing, exacting violence, or impeding refugee movement.

The risk of objectification may be unpacked through an analysis of the concept of an "unearned" income. Refugees do not simply appear on state territory in a manner analogous to natural resources. Instead, they are pushed out of their homes and home countries. Even after finding safety, refugees do not have freedom of movement. They are contained by national and international policies and practices that monopolize the legitimate means of movement (Torpey 1998). Borders produce refugees (Haddad 2003). Scholars must not lose sight of these facts because they guide us to question the basic premise of refugee rents: Is refugee-hosting a good or service that can be sold? Or, may a critical accounting of the causes and consequences of refugee displacement push scholars to examine rent-seeking practices as a form of responsibility sharing, distinct from other economic dealings? Assessing responsibility is not only a moral question, but it also attacks the premise of a "value-neutral" "unearned income."

Conclusion

Jordan has a long history of refugee reception and reliance on external funds, making it a special case through which to examine and expand the concept of refugee rentierism. Jordan is part of a global system of refugee management in which states in the Global North finance refugee-hosting abroad. The majority of the world's refugees live in countries in the Global South. This status quo can be understood as a *buyer's market*, in which the buyers—donor states—set the price that they are willing to invest in refugee-hosting abroad through humanitarian aid and other forms of support. The status quo was disrupted in 2015 when over one million migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arrived in Europe in search of sanctuary. Jordan, like other refugee host states in the Global South, was better positioned to ask for more aid in exchange for its ability and willingness to host refugees after this exogenous shock to the status quo. Jordan's *refugee-hosting capacity* became more valuable to Global North states and a *seller's market* emerged briefly, only to wane in the years that followed.

The financial support that Jordan received in the wake of 2015 and the subsequent downturn reflected neither the number of Syrian refugees on its territory nor the level of need faced by refugees or members of the host community. The number of Syrians registered with the UNHCR in Jordan gradually increased, but this increase cannot be used to estimate the level of support that the state

would receive from donor countries. Aid received in any given year is not a reflection of need. Despite the buyer's market characterization of the relationship between Jordan and donor states, officials still needed to market Jordan's refugee-hosting capacity, if only to stem the losses associated with refugee reception and management. One way that Jordanian officials are able to do this is by keeping refugees visible through images and curated human interest stories from the al-Za'tari refugee camp. In this way, al-Za'tari serves as a PR camp.

The practice of rent-seeking runs the risk of objectifying refugees because their visibility allows host states to market the value of the state's refugee-hosting capacity. Visibility comes with a cost, especially for refugees. Host states may prevent refugees from accessing full social, political, and legal incorporation so that refugees do not fall outside the framework of aid, which would allow the international community to further abdicate responsibility to provide financial support. Yet, critiques against the host state should not be analyzed in isolation; instead, critiques should be nested in examinations of the global system of refugee management. The language of buyers' and sellers' markets emphasizes the relationships among states that facilitate the global distribution of the world's refugees that is as much about hosting as it is about deterrence.

Important critiques of refugee rentierism are worth exploring. The designation of rents may run the risk of Orientalizing MENA states that depend on external funds to support refugees on their territory. While rents are "unearned" gains, refugee-hosting requires extensive risk-taking and innovative interventions that demand flexibility as conditions and resources change over time. I have juxtaposed rentiers with entrepreneurs to capture the theoretical importance of this point. Moreover, ascriptions of the rentier state designation may be called into question when scholars examine net costs and benefits. A comprehensive analysis of the gains and losses associated with refugee-hosting is difficult to ascertain. While tracking external funds may be simple to calculate as income for the state, calculations remain incomplete because they impose temporal boundaries for the sake of measurement and neglect the ways in which the costs of refugee-hosting are diffuse and unbounded. The practice of rent-seeking may be theorized as a way in which states strategically work to curtail such costs in the future.

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Endnotes

[1] The Jordan Compact was signed in February 2016 at the London Conference. The Compact outlined an agreement that combines humanitarian and development funding, including $700 million in grants provided over three years and $1.9 billion in concessional loans. In exchange for this support, Jordanian officials agreed to create greater opportunities for Syrian refugees to enter the labor market in specified sectors, issuing 200,000 work permits, and providing all Syrian children with access to education as well as some vocational training opportunities. The EU also committed to relaxing some trade regulations with the goal of supporting Jordanian exports (for more on the Jordan Compact, see Barbelet *et al.* 2018).

Azad Visas in the Gulf:
Exploring Migration Rentierism and its Implications

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Introduction

Migration rents complement oil and gas revenues as unearned income streams in the Persian Gulf rentier model. Forms of government regulation contribute to the broader rentier bargain, as they become part of the intricate web of financial benefits available to citizens (Malik 2017; Alimukhamedov and Hashim 2021). Protected access to domestic labor markets, barriers to foreign business ownership, and other provisions that are ostensibly designed to protect citizens' economic rights in reality allow for the accrual of regulatory rents (Malik 2017). The rentier bargain lies at the heart of migration policymaking in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as particular tools of regional migration governance have allowed citizens to control access to the labor market and accrue additional financial rewards. Given the state–business relations that exist in the six member states of the GCC, providing the perks of privilege to designated economic elites is considered essential for regime stability. However, it is not just privileged elites that benefit from migration rents; these are accrued widely and every day. Drawing on existing literature and complemented by a few qualitative interviews, this essay explores irregular forms of migration, including "Azad" visas. The Azad visa category contains visas that migrants pay for; they get a valid visa sponsor but without a job contract attached. Azad visas are purchased by individuals seeking either entry to the Gulf or greater flexibility in employment in the region. This essay argues that irregularity is a by-product of the Gulf migration rentier state, which is not enabled by the lack of regulation and oversight but rather is baked into the system of governance itself.

Migration Rentierism Framing

Migration rentierism is a useful concept in the context of analyzing the motivations and dynamics of human mobility along the entire chain, from the individual decision to emigrate to the regulations of states sending and receiving migrants. Migration can be driven or influenced by rent-seeking behaviors and rentierized migration economies. Individuals or groups can accumulate wealth and power by controlling access to resources, opportunities, or privileges, and in the case of the Gulf, the labor market is where this is visible. Both state and non-state actors or entities exploit and extract rents from migration processes, shaping the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of migration. The desperation of vulnerable individuals seeking to change their circumstances and find economic traction through migration is an endless source of revenue for those who choose to exploit it.

Understanding the dynamics of rent-seeking behaviors inherent in some migratory corridors helps uncover the underlying incentives and power structures that perpetuate certain illicit and exploitative practices in migration governance (Project on Middle East Political Science 2019). This perspective also helps us move between the micro-level behavior of labor migrants navigating Gulf labor markets and the macro-level impact of the political economy of migration policies. What is more, it centers questions about the power dynamics between sending and receiving states, both of which use migration policies and visa regimes as rent-seeking and extractive levers.

Kafala as Rentier Gatekeeper

Historically, the Gulf states are only one subset of a wide range of countries that have implemented temporary foreign worker programs to address labor shortages in specific sectors. These programs can be designed to extract rents from migrant workers deliberately or implicitly. Additionally, the high costs associated with temporary worker visas and work permits can serve as rent revenues for both sending and receiving states. Migration rentierism

and profit extraction from temporary visa regimes may contribute to migrants being pushed into illegal or irregular statuses by creating financial burdens, exploitative working conditions, limited pathways to regularization, and punitive enforcement measures (Fernandez 2017).

To meet their domestic labor needs and simultaneously avoid becoming immigrant-based societies, the Gulf states have implemented sponsorship systems which tie migrant workers' legal status to their employers for the duration of their work contracts (Dito 2015). GCC citizens benefit financially from their role as gatekeepers to the regional labor market in a variety of ways: first, through the provision of cheap labor to operate their businesses and, second, by benefiting financially from the provision of work visas. Through their gatekeeping role, citizens can extract economic rents by charging recruitment fees, imposing labor market restrictions, or benefiting from the exploitative labor conditions faced by migrant workers. The Kafala system, which has effectively privatized the visa process since the mid-1950s, has been extensively studied and critiqued for its shortfalls in protecting migrant workers' labor rights (Gardner 2010; Jureidini 2014; Kamrava & Babar 2012; Khalaf *et al.* 2015; Babar 2020). This system, along with the transnational labor recruitment mechanism that controls access to the profitable and fiercely competitive job market in the Gulf, together facilitate the generation of profits at various stages in the migration system.

Despite both sending and receiving states avowing to curtail the practice of migrants paying for the right to work in the Gulf, the Kafala system has become normalized: thousands of migrants headed for jobs in the region continue to bear the costs of recruitment and pay for the right to work. The outright sale of these visas also occurs, primarily through transnational labor recruitment systems, which charge migrant workers exorbitant fees to obtain visas, both legal and irregular, which often leaves them in debt bondage. A complex web of factors contributes to irregular migration in the Gulf region. The role of transnational recruitment as a supply-side driver is critical in facilitating this form of migration, as brokers actively try to encourage migrants to purchase "free" visas as they provide the greatest profit-making opportunity for brokers. But additional factors serve as demand-side drivers, including migrants' anxieties about their tenuous employment status, exploitative and harsh working conditions, and the limited (usually two-year) duration of their legal visas.

Rentiered at Both Ends: The Transnational Migration Corridor

For many South Asian sending countries, remittances sent home by migrants working in the Gulf form a significant portion of the national income. In Nepal, by way of example, the national economy relies extensively on the inflow of remittances from Gulf-based Nepali workers, which can create a deep dependency dynamic (Shrestha 2008). With remittances amounting to a 25% ratio of gross domestic product, the Nepali government has a strong interest in implementing policies that encourage or facilitate migration, while other actors exploit this dependency by creating profit-generating systems along the transnational migration corridor. Nepali citizens struggling to find local employment turn to migratory pathways out of the country. The case for Pakistan is remarkably similar, and in addition to economic logic, both these South Asian states' migration policies harbor political incentives that support the migration of disenfranchised groups (Tsourapas 2018).

Emigration rentiers have strategically developed a multifaceted approach to manage various aspects of labor migration and have established an all-encompassing migration architecture to enable it (Brand 2006). In their introductory remarks to this essay compilation, Tsourapas and Lynch (2024) posit that the normalization of migrants' commodification is discernible in both domestic and international spheres. This is certainly visible in South Asian emigration rentiers, where a number of state-managed regulatory bodies not only oversee the legal framework for migrants' departure and provide the necessary documentation, but also work closely with various private entities to oil the wheels of international

labor migration. The state's bureaucratic processes incur administrative fees, application charges, and other expenses that migrants have to bear (Babar 2020; Babar 2022). **Health-vetting centers—which can be public, semi-public, or private**—assess the health of migrants to ensure they are fit for work and pose no public health risks to the host population. While health-screening is an essential prerequisite prior to departing for work in the Gulf, the costs for it are usually, again, borne by migrants, who pay for medical examinations, vaccinations, and health certificates. Security checks or "bio-vetting" are also conducted by both public and private authorities in sending states to ensure that migrants do not have criminal records or affiliations that could pose a threat to the host country, and the costs associated with these background checks and security clearances are also usually transferred to migrants. Many sending states aim to enhance the employability of their migrants by providing skills training and certifications. While this is beneficial for migrants in the long run, the costs of training programs and skills assessments can be substantial. Often, migrants must invest time and money to acquire these skills before departing (Sordi 2018). These varied entities that collectively form a pre-departure migration architecture serve both the sending state's interests and ostensibly migrants' aspirations, but they also serve as immensely lucrative earning streams.

Migrants seeking temporary work visas may be required to pay exorbitant fees to recruitment agencies or intermediaries. These fees can be inflated and exploitative, creating significant financial burdens on migrants. In order to afford these fees, migrants may resort to borrowing money or selling assets, pushing them into debt or financial vulnerability. In some cases, migrants may be unable to repay these debts, which can lead them to accept exploitative work conditions or seek alternative, irregular means of migration. Temporary visa regimes often impose restrictive labor regulations on migrant workers, such as tying their legal status to specific employers or limiting their ability to change jobs. This creates a power imbalance between employers and migrants, as the employers effectively control the migrants' legal status and livelihoods. Exploitative employers may take advantage of this situation by subjecting workers to low wages, poor working conditions, and labor rights abuses.

Although the Gulf has a highly controlled immigration system, with entry tied to specific labor market needs, selling and trading of visas occurs widely in the migratory corridor that links the region to Asia. Within the sprawling migration assemblage in Pakistan, a variety of civil society organizations aim to educate potential migrants to help them not only avoid violation of their labor rights when in the Gulf, but also avoid falling into the clutches of nefarious labor brokers intent on defrauding them. The Migrant Resource Center (MRC) in Islamabad is a semi-public body that supports migrants and the state in ensuring the "safe and orderly migration" of Pakistanis. Its outreach efforts aim to educate the wider public about the safest and legal means by which they can seek employment overseas, as Khayyam Sohail, Counselor at the MRC, explains:

> "Outreach is where we [MRC staff] go out, let's say on a weekly basis, to a vocational training institute or to a university. It could be in Islamabad, it could be in Rawalpindi, and it could be somewhere else. Like, Shahid [MRC colleague] tomorrow will be going to Gujarat. When he goes there, he will talk to students about safe migration, irregular migration. They have a presence in the community, in small villages, so they will go and do street theater; the message will be through street theater, like 'If you want to migrate, don't take any subagent or any agent's word that he will send you to Europe or the Gulf for Rs.100,000 or 200,000 [$350–450]. Make sure you speak to the Migrant Resource Centre people first if you want to go."[1]

MRC interlocutors spoke at length about the perils of the Azad visa, citing it as one of the most pernicious means by which Pakistanis are lured into paying excessive amounts for jobs in the Gulf. Such free visas allow entry into the labor market but are untethered from actual formal labor market needs. For instance, a Gulf-based employer has a legitimate need for six additional workers

but gets permission from the ministry for 10 visas. The four additional visas become Azad visas, which are sold via the transnational labor recruitment system. Once the Azad visa holders arrive in the Gulf, in addition to the money they have paid up front, their sponsor might expect additional sums of money on a monthly basis or at least a couple times a year to keep the paperwork in order.[2]

Categorization of the Gulf's Azad, free, and freelance visas defies strict classification into the conventional legal or illegal frameworks. Gulf migrants cannot be neatly placed into either the legal or illegal categories, as many holders of free or Azad visas maintain their presence in the Gulf within the bounds of legality. They do not represent individuals who have breached borders, entered the country clandestinely, or evaded immigration authorities. Azad visa holders undergo thorough vetting processes at both the sending and receiving ends, with various branches of the state migration apparatus facilitating these procedures, ultimately leading to the formal sanctioning of their visas by Gulf governments. While the Gulf free visa may be perceived as a potential transgression of immigration regulations in principle, the reality often unfolds as a complex interplay involving breaches of national labor laws and the technical exploitation of specific visa category stipulations. Consequently, existing in this realm of irregularity can be more accurately characterized as "illegally employed" rather than outright illegal.

This nuanced perspective becomes palpable through the experiences of individuals like Rima. Trained as a beautician, Rima initially worked under a Kafala visa at a salon in Dubai from 2010 to 2015. After returning to Nepal to care for her son, she found herself contemplating another migration journey nearly seven years later. However, labor brokers in Kathmandu, considering her age (above 40), conveyed that securing employment in her previous field might prove challenging. They noted that such roles were typically occupied by younger women in their 20s and 30s. Brokers told her that her best bet was to get a freelance/Azad visa and then find her own work in the Gulf. Rima paid QAR 17,500 ($4,800) in 2022 for an Azad visa to Qatar. She acknowledges that this was an enormous sum of money, but says the Nepali labor broker persuaded her that she would be able to earn over QAR 3,000 ($850) a month as a freelancer.[3] Her first year in Qatar was a significant struggle, as she was unable to find appropriate, well-paid employment. The hospitality sector afforded a lot of opportunities, and she picked up a few quick jobs working as a waitress in five-star hotels. But having never worked in hospitality before, she had neither the skills nor the training, and her employers had no interest in investing the time to provide her with either. The hospitality sector in Qatar relies on hiring additional freelance staff for special events and during the busier seasons. However, employers look for staff who either have previous experience or who can pick up new skills immediately, so they can slot in quickly. After several fruitless attempts, Rima decided to resume work in the beauty industry. She was able to find a job working at a salon and worked for almost three weeks, however she had run out of money by then and asked her new employer for a small advance so she could meet her accommodation and food expenses. The employer was so put off by Rima's request for an advance that she terminated her employment immediately. Rima says she was not even paid for the weeks of work she had completed, and because she was no longer working as a sponsored employee, she was not in a position to make a legal complaint. After several months of not finding anything suitable in the industry for which she was trained, she finally took up the position she currently employs, which is as a cleaner in a primary school. Her salary is QAR 1,300 ($360) a month, which is less than minimum wage. Moreover, she does not get an allowance for food and accommodation but, given her irregular status, she is unable to press for more. In a 2017 interview, the Director of the Protectorate of Emigrants office in Peshawar elaborated:

> "There was another order which stated that the OEP [Overseas Employment Promoter] can receive money for the expenses incurred in the visa-obtaining process from the immigrant other than his service charges. The service charges are in the form of a bank certificate which the recruiter requests us to release 72 hours after the migrant has flown out of the country.

> We have heard that OEPs charge up to Rs. 250,000 [*c.*$2,300] per visa and they justify it by saying that we pay for the visas in the Gulf because there is a lot of demand and competition from labor from other countries like India and Bangladesh. They [OEPs] say if we don't pay for the visas, Pakistanis won't be able to go and work abroad. They say that they only earn around Rs. 25,000 per person, but only God knows what is true. However, migration is smooth and even increasing. It is not in our hands to stop or change it and I think not even our government can do anything about it because it is happening in another country. The whole world knows that the migration visa, which is around Rs. 2 million [*c.*$20,000], is based on arrangements where people are just seeking profits [referring to the Azad visa]. They are just issuing visas for money even if there is no employment [for the person who buys it]."[4]

Rima's case reveals that labor brokers and recruiters are paid for their services, but migrants also incur additional bureaucratic expenses related to the visa-obtaining process. This dual revenue model raises questions about transparency, accountability, and the extractive potential inherent in migration processes that are delivered by the state at both the receiving and sending ends. The fact that service charges are levied after the migrant has left the country suggests a potential lack of control over these charges at the sending end. Moreover, as the Director of the Protectorate highlighted, the increase in migration has exacerbated the inability of sending state governments to control or influence the process. Consequently, once in host states, migrants have little capacity to turn to their governments for support should their labor rights be denied. In response, some migrants choose to overstay their visas or engage in informal or undocumented work to escape these exploitative situations.

Labor recruiters and employers may be disincentivized from ensuring that migrants are a good fit for the jobs they are hired for. Recruiters and employers tend to view low-skilled migrants as homogeneous or interchangeable, giving them little incentive to invest in screening to find the best workers. The logic of profit would suggest that employers prefer migrants who are content to remain in their jobs long term, and that managing a good fit between skills and job placement brings benefits to the employer, worker, and recruiter. Given the benefits of good rather than poor worker–job matches, why do high migration costs and poor worker–job matches persist? And can rent-seeking from the migration process propel or incentivize poor matches? Citizen sponsors and recruiters may not care about placing the most desirable candidate in a job if the costs of recruitment are borne primarily by the migrant and if selling job offers and work visas serve as lucrative sources of revenue in themselves.

Haider, a Pakistani man who headed to Dubai in 2013, embarked on his journey following all the legal protocols and with the necessary skill set to succeed in his job, only to face unexpected obstacles that culminated in the loss of his job.[5] Haider's narrative begins with his training as an electrician and subsequent advancement in Pakistan to become specialized in maintaining and repairing vehicle air conditioners. Hoping for increased earnings and career growth, he decided to migrate to Dubai in 2013. Haider's migration was facilitated by an uncle who was a resident in the Gulf and helped organize the job for him. A recruiter in Pakistan arranged the visa, with Haider paying a healthy amount of money for his services. Once in Dubai, Haider encountered a challenging and uncertain period, without having any work to do or salary earned for over two months, although he was on a sponsored visa and had arrived in Dubai with a contract in hand. The disorganized entry registration process and adverse conditions Haider experienced underscore the vulnerabilities that migrant workers often encounter, regardless of regular status. Eventually, he was able to start working for his sponsor and began earning his monthly salary. He was settling into his work routines and performing well, but his employment came to an abrupt end just eight months in, as a result of managerial changes that resulted in downsizing, disregarding the two-year employment term stipulated in his contract. Haider's return to Pakistan brought even more disillusionment as he sought redress from the recruiting agent, who was unresponsive.

Haider's interview serves as a powerful testament to the challenges faced by legal migrants in the Gulf region. His experience reveals that even when individuals meet the prerequisites for employment, they remain vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances that can undermine their efforts. The inherent instability of visa sponsorship systems can push potential migrants toward irregular pathways as they seek agency and control over their own destinies. This lack of control over one's visa status and employment fate has far-reaching implications. It underscores how individuals may be driven to irregular migration in search of autonomy, as they strive to avoid being at the mercy of employers, visa sponsors, and a migration system that appears to them purely extractive in nature.

Concluding Thoughts

With multiple pitfalls involved in legal migration to the Gulf, migrants are in fact incentivized to pursue other options. The Azad or free visa is one such means by which migrants try to bypass the constraints of the system. While ostensibly providing international workers with greater opportunities to access Gulf labor markets, the Azad visa also enables a host of stakeholders involved in the migration system to generate profits from visa sales. While many migrants navigate their irregular and freelance status successfully, others fall prey to debt bondage, struggle to pay off exorbitant fees to recruiters, find it difficult to secure well-paid employment, and may return home with even less than they set out with. The sale of irregular visas is a manifestation of the power monopoly that characterizes migration rentier states: it creates both a segmented labor market (where Gulf citizens work primarily in the public sector and foreigners in the private sector) and a hierarchical and racialized labor market (in which some migrants are considered more valuable than others) (Thiollet 2019). Highly skilled migrants, frequently from the Global North, are actively recruited to the Gulf to fill a host of occupations in multiple sectors across the regional labor market. While all categories of migrants are also primarily resident in the Gulf on employer-sponsored visas, their status provides them with considerably more bargaining power vis-à-vis their employers. Highly skilled migrants are far less likely to encounter potentially exploitative practices that the more vulnerable low-skilled migrants, predominantly from Asia and Africa, must contend with.

Rent-seeking behavior in tightly controlled temporary labor migration contexts perpetuates a cycle of irregular and illegal migration. The extraction of economic rents, high costs imposed on migrants, policies that exclude integration, limited legal pathways to settle long term in host states, and highly unequal power dynamics between lower-income migrants and Gulf migration gatekeepers all combine to contribute to migrants' heightened sense of vulnerability. Ultimately, based on past experiences as well as migration discourses that abound in sending states, many potential migrants distrust the bureaucratic processes of legal migration. This can drive them to pursue irregular or illegal options as they seek to improve their economic prospects via overseas migration and avoid potential exploitation.

Rima's case underscores the role of both age and gender in Gulf labor market access and suggests that intersectionality may influence migrants' decision-making in seeking irregular forms of migration. Her experience suggests that the Gulf labor market tends to favor younger workers for specific roles, possibly tied to perceptions about physical appearance or perceived energy levels. Ethnicity, gender, and age-based preferences for employees exist in certain sectors in the Gulf, including hospitality, resulting in limited opportunities for certain categories of migrant. However, what Rima's case also reveals empirically is that Gulf migrants are not passive people herded through the system; migrants, especially those who have sojourned for several periods in the Gulf, have a critical understanding of how the "legal" system works. They have intimate knowledge of how Kafala bears the capacity to exploit them, and their strategic attempts to circumvent potential exploitation—and to exercise autonomy—contribute to one strand of ongoing irregular migration. Migrants may exercise autonomy and even secure, at substantial personal cost, situations where they can navigate the labor market independently to some extent; yet this agency/resistance/

choice plays out in the social field and political economy of debt, state surveillance, and marginality.

Migration rentier dynamics in the Gulf render a visa system meant to address domestic labor gaps into yet another extractive enterprise that maintains revenue streams. Consequently, the formal labor market's identified labor gaps are not the sole driver of inward labor migration. Accessing the Gulf labor market through strictly legal and formal means is frequently an expensive undertaking and can lead to precarity. Gaining a job via alternate means, bypassing certain regulations, and "paying to play," as it were, is even more costly. This "rentiered at both ends" system generates flows of labor migrants who have paid for the right, one way or another, to access formal and informal jobs. This can benefit migrants and states when there is high demand for flexible and easily deployable labor (such as in Qatar during the months leading up to, during, and immediately after the 2022 World Cup), but it can also serve in the long run to increase competition for work among migrants and depress wages.

And yet all of this does not mean that people do not make informed choices within this particular political economy of migration; their accounts and experiences reflect far more nuance. Labor migrants' understanding of the implications of the current employer-sponsored labor visa system and the boundaries between regularity and irregularity which they navigate, both willingly and at times under duress, are as yet not fully fleshed out. Pakistani and Nepali migrants' diverse experiences regarding the Azad/free visas expand our understanding of how migrants seek and, in certain cases, achieve, what they believe confers upon them labor-status autonomy and empowerment. This analysis goes beyond a tidy understanding of choice and agency by further parsing how South Asian migrants' ability to exercise a level of labor market autonomy, and to render the visa sponsor nominal, also opens up to some extent the prospect of their own self-positioning on a pathway to irregular migration. This demonstrates that neither the exploitative capacity of the typical labor visa system nor migrants' exercise of agency and choice are as clear-cut, linear, or deterministic as is presumed in much of the literature on the Gulf. Rather, the social and economic expanse of this labor visa system is wider, more nuanced, and inflected by possibilities—both desired and undesirable—in ways that are as yet not fully recognized.

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Endnotes

1 PK 010, Non-anonymized interview with Kayyam Sohail, Migrant Resource Center, Islamabad, May 15 2017.
2 PK 010, Migrant Resource Center, Islamabad, Pakistan, May 15 2017.
3 Anonymized Interview in Doha, August 13 2023.
4 PK 006, Non-anonymized interview with the Director of the Protectorate of Emigrants office, Peshawar, Pakistan, May 10 2017.
5 PK 018, Anonymized interview with a return migrant, August 2 2017, Islamabad, Pakistan.

The Donor Side of Refugee Rentierism and Migration Management Aid

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Introduction

Much of the literature on refugee rentierism has focused on how refugee-hosting states extract aid and other support from donor countries through threats of deportation and blackmail, or through collaboration and back-scratching (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Micinski 2023; Norman 2020). This literature can be understood as a corrective to previous studies on border externalization that too often dismissed Global South countries as agentless. As Lynch and Tsourapas (2024) assert, the refugee rentier concept helped shift understandings of migration governance in the Middle East—and the Global South more broadly—away from Western academic and policy concerns. Instead of prioritizing the impact of conflict-induced and irregular migration on Global North countries, the refugee rentier concept helps to understand the interests of host states, countries of origin, and migrants and refugees themselves.

Yet, in developing this corrective, the interests of donor countries that willingly engage in refugee rentierism, and the mechanisms through which donors agree to pay rents, have been left out. In other words, why do donor states agree to being blackmailed? While numerous studies in this volume focus on the diffusion, payoffs, and negotiating strategies of refugee and migrant hosting states, our paper examines the donor side of rentierism. It analyzes the geopolitical interests of the European Union (EU) and its member states that donate migration management aid, which we theorize as a subcategory of refugee rentierism. Building on our previous work, we define migration management aid as a new form of development funding that leverages conditionality and influence from the donor side. It also restructures migrant and refugee policies in recipient states, with the goal of restricting irregular migration (Norman and Micinski 2023).

To explore these questions, our paper investigates the donor incentives and benefits behind the implementation of the 2015 EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which provided more than €5 million across the African continent. The paper uses content analysis of more than 1,000 policy documents from the EU and elite interviews with EU, UN, and government officials involved with the implementation of EUTF funding.[1] We find that, in addition to undermining democratic institutions in host states, refugee rentierism erodes European democratic institutions by encouraging the negotiation and signing of agreements behind closed doors with no public debate. It circumvents normal financial accountability mechanisms and obscures responsibility for human rights violations funded by EU aid. Refugee rentierism ultimately props up authoritarian rulers willing to implement the EU's migration agenda, while also undermining EU governance, rule of law, and the rights of migrants and refugees.

Background

Building on its colonial history, and especially since the creation of the EU, Europe has used neoliberal trade policies and border externalization measures to influence countries on its periphery, including those of MENA. In the realm of trade, these policies were framed as mutually beneficial under the framework of the 1995 Euro–Mediterranean Partnership and later the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy. However, the policies ultimately disadvantaged MENA states by forcing them to remove import tariffs to the benefit of European producers (Del Sarto 2021). Through training programs, and sometimes by directly installing EU officials within the bureaucracies of MENA countries, Europe strengthened EU-friendly economic and bureaucratic elites and attempted to engineer a business environment conducive to European interests. Europe's externalization of migration, security,

and border control preferences, which has been high on the EU's agenda since the end of the Cold War and especially after the 2004 enlargement of Europe's eastern bloc, used a variety of measures to influence countries on its periphery. This included collaborating with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), convincing MENA states to sign readmission agreements, and providing training and equipment to security forces in MENA states with questionable accountability mechanisms (Lavenex 2006; Geddes 2005).

While agreements such as the 2015 EU–Turkey deal or the 2017 deal with Libya are not new, Europe's fear since the 2015 "crisis" has led it to engage in more brazen deals than it was willing to previously, and to provide enhanced funding for these. The EUTF, which was established at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015 and is worth approximately €5 billion, is an example of this new crisis mentality (Norman and Micinski 2023; Zaun and Nantermoz 2023; Welfens and Bonjour 2023). The resources from the fund were allocated for "the creation of jobs and economic development, basic services for local populations, stability and governance, and migration management" (European Commission 2017). The logic behind the EUTF is that migrants will not choose to leave their home countries and embark on migratory journeys if EU development aid improves the economic circumstances and opportunities in their home countries. This logic contravenes empirical evidence that in the poorest countries, economic and social development increases people's capabilities and aspirations and therefore tends to coincide with an increase in migration in the short to medium term (de Haas 2007). Nevertheless, the EU has pursued these "pseudo-causal narratives" with increased vigor since 2015 (Zaun and Nantermoz 2021). The following section explains why migration management aid is so appealing to the EU, despite its inefficacy and the known risks.

Donor Interests in Refugee Rentierism

Donor interests in engaging in refugee rentierism can be divided into two categories: domestic and international (see Table 1). *Domestic interests* are defined as the goals of European governments that are primarily related to political, cultural, or economic outcomes within their territory. *International interests* are goals related to foreign policy outcomes with the impacts occurring primarily outside of their territory. Domestic interests include decreasing immigration; addressing real or perceived challenges with migration state capacity; leveraging responses to migration as part of an electoral strategy; implementing the most cost-effective policy; and facilitating deportations. International interests include rewarding allies who implement EU priorities; using foreign aid—specifically migration management aid—to achieve foreign policy goals like regional stability or preventing the spread of conflicts; and promoting good cooperation with Middle Eastern and African states. While donors' domestic and international interests in migration management aid often overlap, they are sometimes in tension with each other. This leads to divergent preferences and resulting policies from domestic and foreign policy actors within donor governments.

Table 1: Domestic and Foreign Policy Interests

Domestic Interests	Foreign Policy Interests
Decreasing immigration	Rewarding allies
Addressing migration state capacity	Promoting regional stability
Electoral strategy	Facilitating "good" cooperation with partners
Perceived cost-effectiveness	
Facilitating deportations	

Domestic Interests

The first and most overt domestic interest for donor governments is to decrease immigration to the EU. In

fact, the full name of the EUTF is the "EU Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa". It specifically targets the "root causes" of migration to Europe to prevent irregular (i.e., undocumented) migration. Europe's increased interest in and willingness to use aid to contain migrants and refugees in the Middle East and Africa partly stems from its desperation to prevent another migration crisis like that of 2015. The violence of border guards toward migrants and asylum seekers and the highly publicized, inhumane conditions in refugee camps on Greek islands shocked the European public. While violence toward migrants and the use of camps is commonplace in much of the world, Europe was unprepared to witness it within the Schengen Area. This situation could have been manageable for the EU had it allocated responsibility for the one million asylum seeker arrivals across EU member states. Instead, the result was an existential crisis, with political breakdown in the EU Council, the temporary suspension of Schengen rules, and divergent approaches to asylum seekers across the bloc. Unable to agree on an internal political solution, the EU quickly turned to an old playbook: blocking migrants and asylum seekers from ever reaching European shores (Norman 2020a).

The second benefit for donors in refugee rentierism is the opportunity to address both the real and perceived challenges with migration state capacity for their domestic migration institutions. As one million asylum seekers walked across European borders from Greece to Germany in 2015, many European governments discovered that their national migration agencies did not have the capacity to house, feed, or provide medical care for those in need in the orderly manner to which Europe is accustomed (Micinski 2022). In addition, it was not in the interest of European governments to provide generous support, as they feared it would attract other asylum seekers and force governments to disproportionately shoulder the burden of hosting refugees. Instead of investing in the migration state capacity of its member states, the EU chose to leverage its foreign aid to influence refugee-hosting states in the Global South to prevent onward migration. For example, the European Commission dispersed €3.137 billion from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2014–20) to its member states. However, it allocated €5 billion via the EUTF to build the migration state capacity of North and sub-Saharan African states, and more than €8 billion to support Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan's capacity to host refugees. In fact, the EU was so concerned that it changed the way it reported aid to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), reclassifying support for refugees in donor countries as official development aid (OECD 2023). EU officials made the case for investing in the state capacity of refugee-hosting countries in the Global South to reduce the strain on domestic migration institutions in Europe. Of course, the EU is not a unitary actor within its external migration policy. Different European Commission departments compete for control over funding and influence abroad, including Migration and Home Affairs; Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations; the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument; the European External Action Service; and Frontex.

Third, donor governments use refugee rentierism to pander to their domestic base as part of their wider electoral strategies. During election campaigns, politicians often amp up their anti-immigration rhetoric to fearmonger and appeal to right-wing constituents (Joppke 2020). From 2015, European politicians frequently advocated for using aid to prevent migrants from ever reaching Europe and deporting those who do. For example, Mette Frederiksen, the leader of the Social Democratic Party in Denmark, proposed ahead of the 2019 general election to host asylum seekers in North Africa while they await processing, similar to the UK–Rwanda deal (MacDougall 2022). The Danish government went so far as to open an office in Rwanda ahead of the 2022 elections (Government of Denmark 2021). The Danish deal is a prime example of refugee rentierism, in which a donor state provides aid in exchange for hosting refugees. Frederiksen shifted her party's stance on immigration further to the right, in part because of the growing popularity of the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party. European politicians justified these policies on the grounds that they would "break the business model of traffickers"

and "address the root causes of irregular migration," rather than reinforcing the responsibility of EU member states to provide asylum. Ultimately, European governments want to be perceived as competent, in control, and taking action on migration via deals that signal to the public that their governments are addressing the issue. This is despite numerous studies showing that development aid does not actually prevent emigration from the world's poorest countries (Berthélemy, Beuran, and Maurel 2009; de Haas 2007; Clemens and Postel 2018).

A fourth reason donors are sometimes willing victims of "blackmail" is because engaging in refugee rentierism is perceived as less costly than hosting refugees in Europe. When faced with the choice of hosting one asylum seeker in Europe for approximately €10,000 during their first year, versus €200 per year in Türkiye,[2] donors will prefer the seemingly more cost-effective strategy (OECD 2017; European Commission 2023). In reality, refugee situations are increasingly protracted. This means that the EU may end up paying €200 per year over the course of many years to support refugees elsewhere, instead of making a one-time payment of €10,000 to support a refugee's integration into a European country and eventual self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, a shortsighted view means policymakers still prefer the initially less costly option. For example, the Sweden Democrats party argued:

> "Sweden lacks the resources to pay for a domestic reception of the world's poor and needy, something that the 2015 crisis showed. Sweden must […] instead focus on concrete solutions and humanitarian efforts on the ground, in the immediate vicinity of the crisis, where our limited resources can be of greater benefit" (Government of Sweden 2020).

Coupled with the fear of political pushback from voters if they open additional routes for refugees or are perceived as "soft" on migration, donors are concerned about maximizing the use of their limited resources. This is a prescient domestic interest because national budgets and national debt are contentious political issues for constituents. Therefore, governments must justify why they are willing to spend millions on aiding refugees abroad when there are other pressing needs at home.

Another domestic reason for donors' participation in rentierism is that many of the deals incorporate agreements that facilitate the deportation of irregular migrants or asylum seekers who receive negative decisions on their cases. EU member states have signed at least 243 bilateral readmission agreements, which often link cooperation on deportations with foreign aid (Jaulin *et al*. 2021, 54–55). The EU has also negotiated 16 readmission agreements that apply to all EU members, and nine mobility partnerships. Donor countries view migration management aid as a tool to get migrant-sending countries to take back their citizens. Readmission agreements are a domestic interest for donors because they are concerned with large, undocumented populations that cannot be removed from their territory without the cooperation of a sending or transit state. Governments use aid and other incentives to increase the number of nationalities eligible for deportation because they want to demonstrate that they can implement the restrictive migration policies they campaigned on.

One final reason donors are keen to externalize their migration policies is that migration management aid and other forms of rentierism have less transparency and fewer accountability mechanisms. European governments negotiate migration agreements in secrecy with few opportunities for civil society to influence their content or hold them accountable for what is negotiated, especially when deals are made at the supranational EU level rather than the national level (Guiraudon 2000). After agreements are signed, some donor states refuse to provide the details of agreements because of their implications for national security and foreign policy. For example, the 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation between Italy and Libya contained various formal and informal arrangements, including the establishment of joint patrols along the Libyan coast and reparations paid to Libya (Del Sarto 2021). France also has an array of formal and informal agreements on migration-related policy and security cooperation with its former colonies in North Africa, as Yahmi (2024) demonstrates.

The EU avoids responsibility for human rights violations funded by migration management aid because the migration deals outsource repression to countries along the external border or further afield. It is not a coincidence that most of the migration deals are with authoritarian leaders in Egypt, Türkiye, Morocco, Sudan, Libya, and elsewhere (see Alexandre Bish 2024). While EU member states must nominally follow human rights and EU law when it comes to asylum, their authoritarian allies do not. Migration management aid also helps donors circumvent traditional financial accountability mechanisms. In 2015, when the EU established the EUTF, the constitutive agreement declared the 23 African countries covered by the EUTF in "crisis," thus "given the Trust Fund's objective in a crisis and post-crisis situation, flexible procedures appropriate to the local environment will be used to ensure that the Fund is effective and responsive" (Spijkerboer and Steyger 2019, 502). As a result, the EUTF became a more flexible funding instrument that was not subject to open competition required by EU public procurement laws. Unsurprisingly, some scholars question the legality of the "crisis" designation.

International Interests

There are also international benefits to engaging in rentierism for donor countries. These include leveraging migration management aid to reward allies, attempting to ensure regional stability and prevent the spread of conflict, and promoting good cooperation—often through neo-imperialist measures—with former colonies.

First, EU member states disburse billions to their allies in exchange for restrictive migration policies that prevent onward migration to Europe. But donors reward their authoritarian allies with migration aid when they implement EU priorities more generally, not just in the migration sphere. The EUTF was wound down in 2021 (although grant disbursement and implementation continues) and was replaced with the €79.5 billion fund colloquially titled "Global Europe," which supports cooperation with third countries around the world (not just Africa) and broadens priorities beyond migration (European Commission 2021b). Within Global Europe there is a specific program for migration, which is allocated €573 million (European Commission 2021a). There are also "Team Europe" initiatives that funnel money into partner states to block migration on the Central and Western Mediterranean routes. Together, the EUTF, Global Europe, and other Team Europe initiatives provide powerful incentives for countries in MENA and further afield to implement EU priorities.

While the EU claims that all of the projects supported by EU funding must respect EU law and human rights, the European Commission has not hesitated to continue to make new deals with authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Türkiye.[3] In July 2023, the European Commission signed a sweeping memorandum of understanding with Tunisia that provided €105 million in exchange for stricter border control and cooperation on countering human trafficking, €150 million for budget support, €10 million for student exchanges, and €65 million to improve schools. The EU also offered an additional €900 million in economic assistance contingent on Tunisia adopting proposed International Monetary Fund reforms (Al Jazeera 2023). Civil society groups criticized the deal, which reinforced President Saied's increasingly authoritarian rule—despite his dissolution of parliament, racist scapegoating of Black migrants, and imprisonment of opposition leaders. Tunisia is the most recent example of the EU turning a blind eye to the repression and human rights violations of its authoritarian allies because they are partners on migration.

Second, donor countries spend billions on migration management aid because they are concerned about regional stability and preventing the spread of conflict and displacement that could result in increasing numbers of migrants and asylum seekers arriving at Europe's doorstep. The EUTF founding document explicitly links the funding to stability: "to contribute to better migration management as well as address the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration" (European Commission 2015, 6). This builds on the aims of previous regional programs including the

1995 Euro–Mediterranean partnership and the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy, which also purported to promote democracy among countries neighboring the EU to prevent instability. Ultimately, donors are concerned that repression, violence, or civil war could lead to increased forced migration, which could spread conflicts to neighboring countries and destabilize entire regions. This would have knock-on effects and damage the EU's strategic foreign policy interests, like trade, resource extraction, and counter-terrorism.

Of course, as several papers in this volume document, host states use this prerogative to extract rent from donor states. They threaten instability should donor states attempt to minimize or cut off aid. Egypt, a country of 100 million citizens, claimed in 2022 to host nine million foreigners in a "refugee-like" situation. This outlandish figure was directed at EU donors to incentivize them to increase financial assistance. One EU official explained that while they knew the number was fantastical, they also understood the veiled threat, stating: "This number coupled with the economic situation [in Egypt] is convincing. Egypt has 100 million people with 9 million migrants, and the economic situation is a game changer. Egypt is 'too big to fail,' but if it fails it would be a disaster. So Europe is listening."[4] Ultimately, Europe's willingness to go along with such threats further empowers refugee-hosting countries to continue using this type of tactic to press for additional funding.

Furthermore, donors are interested in migration management aid because it can be portrayed as good cooperation with African states, therefore avoiding the image of European neocolonialism. Despite some negative press around migration deals, the EUTF is often spun by European officials as best practice in development cooperation. This is a win-win for both the EU and African countries and helps beneficiaries facing deep poverty. While some of the projects do help destitute people in the least developed countries, most of the EUTF goes to transit countries closer to the EU that produce or provide transit opportunities for irregular migrants, rather than to the poorest or neediest countries. The EUTF has frequently selected European development agencies (such as GIZ, AFD, or AICS) as implementing partners.[5] This means that the EU was effectively paying European "experts" to implement migration management projects in their former colonies (Spijkerboer 2021, 5–6). In theory, the EU would have more control over projects to prevent corruption or misuse, but this neglects the agency that recipient country governments—and particularly their security agencies—have in both project design and evaluation (Snider 2018; Norman and Micinski 2023). Nevertheless, donor countries continue to uphold the EUTF as a vehicle for the EU to work jointly with African states to combat human trafficking and cooperate on development for mutual benefit.

Conclusion

In sum, donors engage in refugee rentierism because it serves both their domestic and foreign interests. Domestic interests include attempting to decrease immigration, building the capacity of other host states, rallying votes in elections, and because it is perceived as cost-effective, allowing them to increase deportations of irregular migrants. In addition, policies used to outsource migrant and refugee-hosting are less accountable to domestic institutions and regulations. International interests include rewarding allies and attempting to maintain regional security by preventing conflict and maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, many of the strategies are touted as good partnerships and win-win means of promoting development.

In reality, domestic and international interests can be in conflict, and can also backfire for donor countries. Turkish rentier behavior toward the EU is a case in point, with implications for domestic Greek politics. Four years after the implementation of the EU–Turkey Deal—which is already widely perceived as a victory in migration diplomacy for Turkish President Erdoğan—Türkiye allowed thousands of migrants and refugees residing in Türkiye to attempt to reach Europe via Greece in March 2020. In some cases, individuals were forcibly bused from Istanbul to the Greek border. The response on the

Greek side was harrowing, with migrants captured, tear-gassed, beaten, detained at a secret detention facility, and eventually expelled back to Türkiye without due process (Norman 2020b). After negotiations, the EU was willing to increase its funding for refugees in Türkiye if Ankara agreed to put an end to the thousands of individuals attempting to cross the Turkish–Greek border. Not only was this an embarrassment for the EU, but it worked to further harden domestic political opinion against migrants and refugees. This ensured that Greek public opinion was in opposition to more liberal, humane policies during the lead-up to the 2023 national election (Irgil, Norman, and Tsourapas 2023).

The human rights implications of European willingness to engage in rentierism are also harrowing. Under the EUTF, Sudan received funding to improve the capacity of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the paramilitary force that grew out of the Janjaweed militia group responsible for committing atrocities in Darfur. The RSF was selected under the EU-funded 2014 Khartoum Process to patrol the Sudanese border (Baldo 2017; Hassouri 2023). The EUTF funding to Sudan helped the RSF purchase surveillance technology, equipment, and provided training for border guards. This increased the group's repressive capability and its ability to use brute strength against Sudanese nationals and migrants alike. The long-term implications of this are visible in Sudan's current civil war between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces. The war began in April 2023 and has killed at least 12,000 people (though actual figures are likely higher) and displaced eight million people from their homes as of early 2024. Europe's intentions may have been to promote regional stability to prevent irregular migration, but the result has been instability, death, and mass displacement.

Beyond the shortsighted international implications of Europe's participation in refugee rentierism, there are profound impacts for Europe at home as well. Since at least the creation of the Schengen Area in 1985 and the subsequent construction of "Fortress Europe," the EU has turned a blind eye to the fate of migrants and refugees contained outside its borders. As long as these individuals did not reach European soil, they were not entitled to European rights. Their treatment elsewhere was also generally kept out of the sight of European citizens. But the EU's increasing willingness to now bend its own principles at home—in addition to what it funds abroad—to finance refugee rentierism, foretells a new level of democratic decline. In the case of the EUTF, Europe's willingness to avert its own accountability mechanisms to rapidly implement projects across the African continent undermines its commitment to rule of law, good governance, and human rights, not just abroad—as has long been the case—but also domestically.

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Endnotes

[1] These interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023 in Egypt, Kenya, and Ethiopia, with remote interviews conducted regarding Sudan. Interviews are covered under IRB-FY2021-213 at Rice University and IRB- 2022-03-24 at the University of Maine.

[2] This calculation is based on reports of financial assistance programs available to Syrian nationals in Türkiye. It is an estimate as support varies by household size, location, and a number of other factors by which the Turkish government and international organizations measure "vulnerability."

[3] For more on the history of Tunisian and European cooperation, see Yahmi (2024).

[4] Interview with a de-identified EU official, Egypt 2023.

[5] The full titles of these acronyms are Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Agence française de développement (AFD), and Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (AICS).

"Not Our Burden":
A Principal–Agent Analysis of Morocco's EU-Style Migratory Policies

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Introduction

The "waves of refugees" or "migrant crises" of the past decade have shaped diplomatic relations to the extent that some scholars have written about the Western Mediterranean security complex (Haddadi 1999, Benantar 2013, Hamzaoui 2020, Stivachtis 2021). Internal displacement, cross-border migration, and mobility between Africa and Europe continue to increase. Hot topics newly associated with migration—including radicalization and terrorism—shape inhumane and negative perceptions utilized to "justify" exceptional measures and policies.[1] Since 2008, European states have united behind the banner of the European Union (EU) to contract out "irregular" migration limitation to external partners for its own internal security.[2] This strategy has been materialized through the Migration and Mobility Partnerships (MMPs), which are enticing "bundles" aimed at assisting the EU to manage "its" migrant or refugee crisis.

This paper employs a principal–agent (P–A) analysis to explore how Morocco, a key transit point for migrants coming from Africa to Europe, has operationalized its MMP with the EU. The study draws upon the literatures on migration and refugee rentierism and delegation in international organizations. The paper shows that partnerships can trick and trap principals when agents apply conditions to implementation of the delegated task and thus impose their divergent preferences or hidden interests. I use the terms "refugee" and "migrant" interchangeably, as what Europe labels a refugee, Morocco calls a migrant. The paper will not tackle the motivations of the migrants or the rigors of their journey, but one must remember the numerous catastrophes that have occurred in the past decade, making the Mediterranean first and foremost a "graveyard",[3] rather than a "pasta strainer."[4] The racial motivations and domestic factors nurturing the political treatment associated with migration commodification—that is, capitalizing migrants, although it goes with dehumanization too—will also not be discussed (but for relevant work, see Irgil 2024).

The following sections will review the literature on migration rentierism and delegation in international organizations and lay out the working theory for the case studied. I first examine the EU as a principal, contracting out "mobility" control and externalizing its borders. Next, I analyze Moroccan policies implemented after the MMPs were signed. To illustrate a key dimension of the refugee rentier bargain, the paper focuses on the externalization of border management and the delegation of migration control as requested and proposed by actors of both sides of the Western Mediterranean in response to migrant crises.

Delegating Migration Control: Lessons from Principals and Agents

A major strand of the literature on migration explores migrants' integration into societies and refugee rentierism by political parties and governments. This has led scholars to study the commodification of migrants, where migrants or refugees become commodities in the eyes of some states (Tsourapas 2019 2021). Importantly, the concept of refugee rentierism paves the way for studying the rent-seeking behavior of sending, transiting, and hosting states (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). Transit states like Morocco seek to extract two types of rents. First, Morocco's economy relies on remittances and other goods and services provided by its emigrants, which makes Morocco an emigration rentier state. Second, Morocco and other transit states partnering with the EU "employ their position as host states of forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or refugee rent,

from other state or nonstate actors in order to maintain these populations within their borders" (Tsourapas 2019, 465). Through the MMPs, this refugee rent takes the form of both budget allocation and strategic linkages to impose political interests, but it can take other forms as well (see Worrall 2024, on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states; and Dhingra 2024, on international assistance).

Delegation "is a conditional grant of authority from a principal to an agent that empowers the latter to act on behalf of the former" (Hawkins *et al*. 2006, 7). When both sides of the contract stick to the terms, delegation works as a cost-saving device. Yet asymmetries of information and failure to devote optimal effort can jeopardize the implementation of the contract, for instance if the principal chooses agents that are not the most competent or organized to fulfill the contracted tasks. Three problems can occur while delegating authority (Nielsen & Tierney 2003): hidden information from the principal that would hurt the agent; hidden actions from the agent that would be sanctioned if known; and "Madison's dilemma," when the agent uses powers granted by the delegation of authority against the principal. To alleviate risks, the principal can employ four strategies: screen and select to ensure compatible interests and capability, oversee via third parties, resort to checks and balances, and implement a credible reward and sanction system (Nielsen & Tierney 2003). Since the EU seeks to further its internal security through these mobility partnerships, Morocco is naturally expected to bargain with the EU and attach conditions to fulfillment of the tasks.[5] Yet, beyond the monetization of mobility limitation and visa facilitation offered to Morocco in the partnership, Morocco can still "smuggle in" other interests and condition the success of the delegated task (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 705).

The scholarship on delegation and refugee rentierism advances that this smuggle in of interests by agents can materialize through at least two non-mutually exclusive strategies: blackmailing (threaten to flood Europe if agents' preferences are not considered), and back-scratching (keep refugees in the transit country or deport them to borders because they are perceived simultaneously as a financial opportunity and a human burden) (Tsourapas 2019). Whether contracted agents utilize migrants' lives and bodies as a pretext to pressure their principal (Greenhill 2008 2010), they switch tactics as a way to bargain their domestic interests and often their economic survival. As in the cases of Lebanon, Türkiye, and Jordan, states acting as agents in the EU's policy have increased the gains from their partnerships with the EU after signing their respective MMPs (Gazzotti 2022, Micinski 2021; Tsourapas 2019). Partnering with the EU to combat irregular migration while facing domestic pressure and an economic crisis increases the public's perception that Morocco enjoys EU support. Concomitantly, delegation signals that Morocco plays an important role in controlling the EU's borders, justifying why it can exert influence over its principal. Assuming that partnerships are based on the perception of domestic elites in how "their state is geopolitically important" (Tsourapas 2019, 465), I explore the strategies to which Morocco, acting as the EU's agent in migration policy, has resorted despite potential retributive and reputational costs.

Extracting Rent From Refugees: A Win-Win for Principals and Agents at the Expense of Migrants

The paper combines theories on refugee rent-seeking and migrants as "weapons" to, first, understand the mechanisms agents have employed to advance their interests (Greenhill 2008 2010) and, second, to formulate two related arguments.

First, I argue that migrants constitute a rent source upon which EU agents depend to make a profit. This implies that the presence of migrants in its territory allows Morocco to sign and maintain partnerships that attract financial compensation and other benefits from the EU. Morocco monetizes the prevention of forced or labor mobility around the EU while enhancing its own political and development agenda and offering little or no protection for migrants. Consequently, what is a burden for the principal becomes an opportunity for its agents.

Second, I argue that agents have discretion over the

mechanisms they implement to control migration as agreed with the principal. For a state like Morocco, relying on two types of migration rent implies a strategic compromise because the conditions associated with each rent conflict. Being contracted by the EU means making profit from migrant regulation. Consequently, taking that refugee-seeking rent is counterproductive to the emigration-seeking rent. Thus, a state like Morocco relies on emigration rent for development and on refugee rent for advancing its political and economic interests, particularly through linkages with other international organizations or states. Therefore, the timeline for the signing and implementation of the partnerships matters in understanding when and how EU agents shirk their responsibilities and take actions to trick or contradict the EU's directives and preferences.

Through the P–A framework, I examine the EU's motivations and opportunities to delegate migration regulation, and the strategies used to alleviate risks posed by granting autonomy and authority to external agents. The EU has screened and selected states to act as its agents to ensure compatible interests and capability and establish a credible system to reward them. Morocco has profited from this contract, as its strategy to ease its economic crisis has involved facilitating remittances and making undocumented migrants profitable, which the MMPs offer, since they embrace a "more for more approach" and "rely on simultaneously negotiated visa facilitation and readmission agreements" (MEMO/11/800). However, I argue that the EU has lacked the ability to sanction or control possible agent opportunism when it contracted them (Madison's Dilemma). I show that, consequently, Morocco has resorted to scaremongering tactics to pressure the EU, including through the instrumentalization of migrants as a form of border regulation. Coercing support for certain geopolitical issues has functioned as a non-violent diversionary strategy while consolidating Morocco's position on the international stage. Lastly, tackling irregular migration for transit countries poses the question of regional solidarity and state identity. Public and political reactions after every west-central Mediterranean boat tragedy sadly reflect a loss in humanity despite some media challenging the trivialization and normalization of migrants' deaths.

Methodology

This paper studies the EU delegation process of migration control to Morocco, which is both a country of origin of migrants and a transit country, through a revisited P–A analysis.[6] For insights on the principal side (EU as donor) in the delegation chain, see Norman and Micinski (2024). Morocco is a relevant case given its geographic proximity to Europe, and the domestic political tensions and economic crisis of the past decade. Some migrants have been regularized, but most migrants have stayed between a few months and a few years, and have taken jobs in the tourism, catering, and hospitality industry or in home help services before attempting to cross the Strait of Gibraltar to reach Europe.[7] According to Hugon (2017), 30,000 migrants and refugees were regularized in 2014 despite an unemployment rate of over 30% for young people. Evidence used to document the case study comes from the EU and its various agencies' websites together with official statements, newspapers, political speeches, and reports from governmental, non-governmental, and intergovernmental organizations.

The EU: Contracting "Mobility" Control Through Border Externalization

The P–A framework helps analyze the EU's incentives and expectations in the delegation of human mobility management, as stated in the MMP signed by Morocco in 2013. By expanding and externalizing its border control to non-member developing states, the EU turned its "human burden" into a financial and political opportunity for Morocco.

EU's Incentives to Delegate Mobility Control to Morocco

The first MMPs came after bilateral action plans between external states and the EU, and was concomitant to the creation of the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum in 2008. Morocco signed its MMP in 2013, amid a regional

crisis and before the first European "migrant crisis" declared by the Luxembourg Presidency in 2015. Given that these MMPs were drafted before the crisis "officially" started, they were potentially thought of as preventive tools.

The increasing number of undocumented Moroccans in Europe, the number of migrants crossing the Western Mediterranean more broadly, and the regional weakening of states following the Arab uprisings and conflict in the Sahel were central elements persuading the EU to partner with Morocco on migration. The EU subcontracted Morocco, given:

> "(1) the overall relationship that the EU maintains with each partner country, (2) the current level of capacity in the partner country to manage migration flows, and (3) the willingness of the latter to engage in a constructive and effective dialogue." (COM (2011) 292)

Indeed, the EU and Morocco have signed several agreements to foster dialogue, exchange, and cooperation since the Barcelona Process of 1995 (Mirel 2021). In 2011, 84% of the Moroccans living abroad were based in Europe, which one could argue justifies fostering a privileged partnership with the EU (IP/13/513). The 2011 EU New Response for a Changing Neighbourhood (COM (2011) 303 final) —based on reforms in governance and rule of law, security, social cohesion, economy, and environmental policy—allocated €1.4 billion to Morocco (while Jordan and Egypt received €750 million, and Tunisia €1.6 billion). Certainly "Morocco benefits from an advanced status in its relations with the EU," but its previous experience with border control was dismissed in the screening process (JOIN/2015/50). The Ceuta assault of 2005, in which migrants were killed by police forces,[8] alerted the EU and Morocco to the need to better enforce border controls. The NGO Act Together for Human Rights [Agir Ensemble pour les Droits Humains] criticized repressive migration policies to ensure security and warned about the potential transfer of European responsibilities to third countries that would absolve Europe of certain disasters.[9] Yet Morocco was incentivized to further its partnership with the EU to mitigate its domestic crises and reduce its growing public debt.[10] Indeed, in the P–A model, agents are rational actors who will only accept a contract if the benefits outweigh the costs associated with the tasks. Thus, despite the resilience of the monarchy, tensions within the government and prospects of a burgeoning Hirak Rif movement instilled a quest for both external support and economic stability from Morocco.

Objectives and Expectations of the MMPs Proposed to Morocco

The MMPs are "innovative" diplomatic contracts based on "shared interests and concerns" to enhance the cooperation between the EU and Morocco (MEMO/11/800). The joint declaration establishing the mobility partnership between the EU and Morocco comprised about 46 measures and directives divided into six sections. The wording emphasizes ideals, with half of the measures aimed at boosting existing mechanisms and broad directives. The first 11 measures aim at *enhancing* and *strengthening* the mobility of Moroccans, including better access to information, visa facilitation "for certain groups of people, particularly students, researchers and business professionals" (IP/13/513), and smoother integration into the EU. The next nine directives seek to *reinforce* information exchange, the Moroccan authorities' capacity, and *existing mechanisms* for border management. They also mention support for migrants' fundamental rights, awareness campaigns on human smuggling and trafficking, and assistance in equipping Morocco with a functional legal framework. In the next seven objectives, the focus is on *reinforcing* the role of diaspora, mitigating brain drain, and favoring remittances. The eight horizontal initiatives aim to *reinforce dialogue* and Morocco's capacity. The last nine implementation measures stipulate that the MMP is non-binding, needs to be renewed as needed by parties, and engages both parties to cooperate on the abovementioned objectives. None of the 46 measures are quantified or quantifiable, leaving room for interpretation and evolution from both parties.

For the EU, contributing as a privileged partner to Morocco's economic development promised a reduction in its domestic instability, and therefore in irregular migration. But through these MMPs, "the contracting parties content themselves with an agreement that frames their relationship—that is, one that fixes general performance expectations" (Williamson 1985, 3). In exchange for maintaining masses of migrants in transit countries (migration), which comes with reputational and financial costs, the EU offered facilitation in circulation (skilled mobility) and financial compensation. Setting such vague and non-exhaustive expectations made for blurry instructions and thus established unclear standards, which translated into a reappropriation of the contract terms by the agents. These partnerships lack not only control procedures for situations where the contract is not explicit, but also mechanisms to adjudicate disputes or possible opportunism by agents (Williamson 1985). Therefore, the principal trapped itself in a situation where it could neither assess agency nor impose sanctions, which gave agents plenty of autonomy to impose their own preferences and compel the principal to review its priorities. Despite the screening and selection of compatible agents and a credible reward system, external agents successfully smuggled in their own interests once the EU had adopted a victim position amid the influx of unwanted human movement.

Morocco: Instrumentalization of Migrants as Blackmail Strategy for Diplomatic-Level Coercion

The EU–Morocco MMP, finalized in 2013, is a logical continuation of the ties the two parties have nurtured, namely Europe's reliance on Morocco for border control and Morocco's reliance on migration rents to enhance its economic situation and advance diplomatic interests, particularly the recognition of Western Sahara as part of its national territory. Morocco's economic stability and development rely on emigration rent in the form of remittances (sending funds back home) and transferable skills (investing in the homeland and sponsoring fellow citizens). Migrant remittances to developing countries reached $351 billion in 2011, more than twice the global amount of development aid,[11] and "are more efficient in less financially developed countries with remittances acting as a substitute for credit from the financial sector" (World Bank 2010). According to the World Bank 2010 Migration Report, remittances sent from Moroccan migrants back home reduce the probability of being poor from 15% to 8%. Remittances also positively impact investment in human and physical capital. For instance, children in remittance-receiving households have a lower school dropout ratio, and women receiving remittances work less than other women. Thus, by partnering with the EU to better manage border and migration flows, Morocco has also worked on improving its economic situation to mitigate domestic grievances. But, as irregular migration increased, primarily from Algeria, Sahelian, and coastal West African states, Morocco's strategy was to monetize the maintenance of migrants outside EU territory. This created a second rent for Morocco to benefit from, in the form of financial compensation by the EU and political linkages. Between 2014 and 2022, in exchange for controlling borders and combating irregular migration "including by using new technologies and exchanging best practices with the EU agencies, Frontex and Europol," Morocco has benefited by €1.5 billion (IP/19/6810).[12]

Lastly, a conditional pillar of the MMP was that agents provide asylum services to migrants. Although these MMPs mention that "successful integration in countries of destination creates better conditions," third countries were not legally bound to take steps to readmit or integrate migrants (COM/2011/292). Morocco ratified the Geneva Convention in 1956 and its protocol in 1971, but it is not legally equipped to organize asylum despite increased calls for an effective system since the 2005 Ceuta tragedy. Asylum is still delegated to the High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, making this EU objective another ideal and lengthening the delegation chain.

Engineered Refugee Rent and Diplomatic-Level Coercion

The European strategy of offering migrants financial incentives to relocate to third countries outside of Europe can come with coercion at the diplomatic level from these

third countries. Morocco smuggled in the resolution of (or at least advancement on) dated disputes with the EU or some if its member states, particularly regarding the status of Western Sahara. Morocco has sent credible threats and used migrants to contest the EU or EU member states' actions or position. This instrumentalization of migrants—what Greenhill has called "weaponization"—concretely consists of letting migrants cross the Mediterranean or enter Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish autonomous cities, to flood Europe.[13]

In official statements following critical events, Morocco reminds us of its efforts and dedication to combat illegal immigration and regularize the situation of sub-Saharan migrants.[14] The free trade agreement on agricultural and fisheries products concluded between the EU and Morocco in 1988 was due to be renewed for the 2019–2023 period. Despite the financial benefits, renewal was jeopardized following a European Court of Justice ruling of a case brought by Polisario Front, Western Sahara's pro-independence movement, which claimed that the agreement excluded the territory's inhabitants from negotiations and was thus illegal.[15] In 2016, the European Court of Justice decision that Western Sahara should be included in free trade agreements sparked frustration for Morocco, which, in February 2017, contributed to the "massive" influx of migrants into Ceuta.[16] According to an official statement from the Ministry of Agriculture published the same day (retrieved from Benjelloun 2019), Morocco declared that:

"any obstacle to the application of this agreement is a direct attack on thousands of jobs on both sides in extremely sensitive sectors, as well as a real risk of resumption of the migratory flows that Morocco, through sustained effort, has managed to manage and contain." (97)

Another event that turned into a diplomatic crisis also questioned Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, when the General Secretary of Polisario Front and proclaimed President of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was being treated for COVID-19 in Spain: "weeks after Ghali's hospitalization, more than 10,000 migrants surged into Spain's tiny North African enclave of Ceuta as Moroccan border forces looked the other way, in an incident seen as meant to punish Madrid."[17]

In 2021, Spain was coerced to publicly recognize Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, "ending a decades-long stance of neutrality."[18] As a consequence, Spain contradicted the EU and European Court of Justice rulings and infringed its bilateral and EU relations with Algeria and the SADR.[19]

Morocco was able to attack the EU's position on Western Sahara because the EU had no mechanism to either sanction agents' behavior or set boundaries in its MMP. Intentionally allowing migrants to reach European territory despite the MMP signals that Morocco uses migration as a "safety valve" and blackmail tool.[20] Moroccan threats are credible because of the EU's deeply rooted fear of being flooded by migrants, which gives its partners enough leverage to bargain. Morocco's implementation of the MMP is therefore an ingenious manipulation of migrant movements as political weapons of dispute to enhance its economic situation, advance its geopolitical interests, including the recognition of Western Sahara as part of its national territory, and thus coerce states to violate international legislation.

Conclusion: Migrants as Profitable Instruments, MMPs as Tricky Tools

This paper has explored Morocco's engineered refugee rent and diplomatic-level coercion through a P–A analysis of the MMPs agreed with the EU. The MMPs have been instrumental in commodifying, monetizing, weaponizing (and thus dehumanizing) migrants, although their original goal was to enhance cooperation in combating irregular migration. In the case studied, the EU strategically delegated border control management to Morocco, given its geographic proximity, history with the EU and its member states, and its reputation of being a stable partner. However, the EU did not implement oversight and control mechanisms over practical demands, such as cooperating

with Frontex or ensuring migrants' regularization and safety. The P–A analysis of the MMPs shows that agents smuggle in their own interests and preferences with conditions not previously agreed. Morocco has unlocked a strategy where it makes credible threats regarding the non-resolution of its disputes, in turn dragging the principal into a spiral of pressure and blackmail. While better understanding the wheels of refugee rent-seeking, it remains to analyze the rent derived from proxy quasi-immigration state actors (see Malit 2024, on his work on the Emirati strategy), autonomous entities (Yassen 2024; McGee and Ahmed's 2024 contribution on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), and from criminal and non-state armed groups (see Bish's 2024 contribution regarding EU work in Libya).

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Endnotes

[1] The EU "had a key role to play in managing the growing overlap between international crime, terrorism and migration" (EU Institute for Security Studies 2016, 91).

[2] The 2014–2015 migration flows were also referred to as the "Arab winter" (*ibid*, 87). Additionally, the EU strengthened its border surveillance system "to respond to migratory pressure […], and to reinforce the security of citizens within the Union." Available at: https://france.representation.ec.europa.eu/informations/leurope-est-une-passoire-vraiment-2019-03-20_fr.

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[5] Considering the EU as a unitary actor may scare some because it is a conglomerate of actors, but the EU is also "increasingly speaking with one voice" when it comes to migration (MEMO/11/800). Perhaps it is easier to blame one singular actor and more challenging to hold a plurality of actors accountable for border mismanagement.

[6] Initial works on the principal-agent model focused on Congressional dominance in the United States (Weingast, Calvert, and Moran (1982; 1983; 1984)). For critical overviews, see Mitnick (1980), Moe (1984; 1987). On transposing the Americanists' modeling and hypotheses in the subfield of International Relations, see Pollack (1997; 2002; 2003).

[7] On how states can regularize migrants but manipulate their work status, see Babar's comprehensive study of the Azad visa within GCC states (2024).

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[12] Frontex is the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. See also: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/EU_support_migration_morocco.pdf.

[13] Some find the terminology used in debates on this issue problematic because it dehumanizes migrants and nurtures a political agenda. Unfortunately, there is to date no consensus on suitable alternate ways to describe how powerful entities instrumentalize migrants for political advantage.

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[19] Despite some contradictory signals sent by some EU member states and agencies, the EU supports "a political process with the aim to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the selfdetermination of the people of Western Sahara in the context of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations," in UNGA 77 – Fourth Committee: EU Explanation of Position on Western Sahara Resolution (October 14 2022). Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/unga-77-––fourth-committee-eu-explanation-position-western-sahara-resolution_en.

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Health Rentierism and Displacement:
The Case of Syrian Refugees in Jordan

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Introduction

With forced displacement at its highest levels since World War II, refugee movements often place a considerable strain on the infrastructure and resources of host communities. Yet, hosting refugees can also confer some advantages, especially in negotiations between host states in the Global South and wealthier donor states in the Global North (Greenhill 2010; Norman 2020a; Oyen 2016; Thiollet 2011). Recently, scholarship has begun to explore the ways in which refugee host states engage in "refugee rentierism" by leveraging the presence of refugees in their territories for material and political gain, as well as to renegotiate the stakes and balances of a fundamentally asymmetrical refugee regime (Adamson & Tsourapas 2018; Freier *et al*. 2021; Tsourapas 2021b).

Refugee rentierism has been instrumental in explaining how states such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan have at times wielded considerable influence over the politics of donors, such as the United States (US) and European Union (EU) member states, in exchange for hosting refugees (Adamson and Tsourapas 2018; Norman 2020a). While capitalizing on refugee flows is not a new phenomenon, a focus on "rent extraction" emphasizes how refugee populations are increasingly commodified in the national and international politics of rent-seeking states (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). So far, however, little attention has been paid to the emergence of what I call "health rentierism," or the progressive commodification of vital medical aid and health care services as a foreign policy tool. More specifically, I define health rentierism as a strategy through which states attempt to extract material and political resources from donors by strategically providing and withholding health care services from marginalized refugee populations in their territories.

In this contribution, I consider the case of Jordan, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world (relative to its national population). Since the arrival of an estimated 650,000 Syrian refugees from 2012 onward, Jordan has also become one of the top recipients of foreign aid globally. This essay examines the processes through which health care for refugees has become commodified and ultimately leveraged to extract "health rent." This commodification occurs through a securitization process, which frames both refugees and certain diseases—mainly those that can spread across international borders—as threats to national and international security. As a result, health rentierism allows state actors to leverage the presence of refugees on their territories to gain concessions from bilateral donors and international organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted some of these themes, including the increasing securitization of health and infectious diseases on a global scale. There are many examples of attempts at containing the spread of the virus becoming conflated with measures aimed at protecting national borders and preventing the onward movement of refugees and migrants (Crawley 2021; Ferhani & Rushton 2020).

Health Rentierism and the Jordanian Case

Refugee host states, especially in the Middle East, have a long history of leveraging the presence of refugees in their territories for political and material gain (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). Refugee rentierism can take various forms, depending on the political and geographic position of the host state. For instance, states close to Europe's borders, such as Türkiye, have engaged in forms of *blackmailing* to gain concessions from EU member states (Micinski 2021; Tsourapas 2021a). Such blackmailing strategies include commodifying the presence of refugees by threatening EU member states with the arrival of

greater refugee flows at their borders. For states where blackmailing is not always an option, strategies include *back-scratching* to receive concessions from donors (Tsourapas 2019). Back-scratching involves appealing to the solidarity of donors to respond to the needs of refugees and implicitly agreeing to host refugees for the foreseeable future, in return for grants and concessions. The success of such strategies is dependent on the migration policies of donor states (Thiollet and Tsourapas 2024). Wealthy donor states with externalization policies—which aim to prevent asylum seekers and migrants from reaching their borders by enlisting third countries in the Global South—are more likely to engage in migration diplomacy and comply with the demands of refugee rentier states (Freier *et al*. 2021; Vaagland 2023).

Scholars are increasingly analyzing Jordan's historical and contemporary attempts at leveraging the presence of refugee populations residing in its territory (Almasri 2024, Parker-Magyar 2024; Baylouny 2020; Fakhoury 2019; Lenner and Turner 2018). Historically, Jordan has hosted large refugee populations, including successive arrivals of Palestinian refugees since 1948, Iraqi refugees between 2003 and 2006, and, more recently, Syrian refugees since 2012. As such, Jordan has capitalized on its refugee presence by attempting to extract grants and concessions from the donor states and international organizations operating in the country since its independence in 1946 (Frost 2024). With the arrival of Syrian refugees, rent-seeking behavior has become increasingly normalized. Recent examples include the adoption of nationality-based aid responses, which limit refugee integration while maximizing rent (Almasri 2024), and the commodification of refugees in the provision of educational opportunities (Parker-Magyar 2024).

Based on extensive fieldwork in Jordan and interviews with government officials, donors, and United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organization (NGO) workers involved in providing medical aid to Syrian refugees, I find that lifesaving health care and medical aid have become the new battleground on which power struggles and negotiations between Jordan and often reluctant Western donors play out. As such, I find that health rentierism occurs through a two-step process, which includes the securitization of refugee health and the subsequent commodification of health care services as a bargaining strategy.

Securitizing Refugee Health

Over the past two decades, securitized discourses have raised the visibility of migration and forced displacement and increased the relevance of such issues in the international arena (Bigo & Tsoukala 2008; Lahav & Messina 2023). The growing focus on migration issues has begun to affect mainstream understandings of interdependence among states and the balance of power in North–South relations (Norman 2020b; Paoletti 2011). The migration crisis in 2014 and 2015, which saw more than one million Syrian asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Europe, was met with increased concern over national security and the tightening of borders in the West (Arar 2017; Baldwin-Edwards *et al*. 2019).

While the links between migration and security have long been established (Huysmans 2006), a growing global focus on transnational threats to national security has spilled over into the realm of public health. Over the past decade, infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and more recently COVID-19, have been declared a "threat to international peace and security" by the UN Security Council (Agostinis *et al*. 2021; Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen 2014; Kamradt-Scott 2016). Crawley notes that pandemic-related health crises have a long history of leading to the stigmatization and othering of people, with a particular focus on linking minorities, racial groups, and specific communities to disease (Crawley 2021). In many cases, the discursive securitization of refugees and their health needs has become integrated into efforts to marginalize refugees and create the perception of a widespread crisis that requires emergency responses.

Jordan has historically framed the presence of refugees as a security threat based on domestic and geopolitical considerations. Since the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, which

precipitated the arrival of an estimated 150,000 Palestinian refugees, Jordan has successfully linked its Palestinian population with security threats that resonate with relevant major donors (see Frost 2024). Securitized discourses have ensured a constant stream of international aid in exchange for hosting refugees and have also persuaded wealthy donors to support Jordan's security through arms deals. Such deals have benefited donors commercially and diplomatically while securing Jordan's regime survival (Frost 2024). Over the past decade, Jordan has similarly framed the presence of Syrian refugees as a security crisis, with refugees as potential terrorists who threaten the stability of the Jordanian state in a volatile Middle East region. Initially hailed as "brothers and sisters," over time, Syrian refugees have been increasingly depicted as "foreigners" and marginalized in Jordan (Lupieri 2020).

At the same time, health security has come to dominate the agenda of medical aid. During interviews, Jordanian government health officials and Western donor representatives acknowledged that rumors of terrorists posing as refugees to enter Jordan had become conflated—even before the pandemic—with the framing of refugees as carriers of infectious diseases. Citing national security concerns, Jordan closed its borders with Syria in 2016. This left tens of thousands of refugees stranded at the border, living in makeshift shelters with limited access to clean water, sanitation, and medical care (Awad 2019). Donor representatives coordinating health care aid confided that the humanitarian crisis at the border had become the spatial embodiment of national and international fears over security and the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis. These fears were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with Syrian refugees widely regarded as potential sources for the spread of coronavirus. In 2021, one of the world's strictest lockdowns effectively imprisoned Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan and threatened the flow of international assistance to refugees (Dhingra 2020).

Commodifying Health Care

A host state commodifies vital health care services by providing and withholding them from its refugee population to create a growing perception of an imminent crisis or catastrophe. This crisis requires the immediate mobilization of resources from donors. Despite sustained and unprecedented international aid to support both refugees and Jordanian host communities, health care policies in Jordan have progressively marginalized the health care needs of Syrian refugees. In 2012, all Syrian refugees could access the national health care system at the same rate as Jordanian citizens with health insurance. By 2014, however, the sudden population increase had placed a considerable strain on health care resources, leading Jordanian officials to classify Syrian refugees as "uninsured Jordanians." Access to health care resources remained subsidized, with refugees expected to pay approximately 20% in out-of-pocket expenses (Lupieri 2020). In 2018, the Jordanian government announced a policy change that required refugees to pay the equivalent of the "foreigner rate." The foreigner rate is two to four times higher than the uninsured rate and is usually reserved for tourists seeking specialized medical care in Jordan. A year later, this policy was reversed, and Syrian refugees have since continued to pay the "uninsured rate" (Lupieri 2020).

Jordan has withheld services to refugees at critical junctures as a negotiating tactic to pressure donors into supporting refugees in Jordan in exchange for hosting them. Withholding occurs especially before large donor conferences, as these determine the amount of funding allocated to each country hosting Syrian refugees (Lupieri 2020). Without access to affordable health care, vulnerable refugees have sought services from international NGOs and UN organizations, placing more strain on the humanitarian system. In some cases, desperate refugees have returned to Syria to seek affordable care (Amnesty International 2016).

Health Rentierism: A Successful Strategy?

Without discounting the impact of the presence of more than half a million Syrian refugees on Jordan's infrastructure and health care system, Jordan has wielded both the securitization of refugee health and withholding of health care services at critical junctures in time as

foreign policy tools. Strategic border closures in 2016 resulted in the abandonment of refugees caught in an inhospitable patch of land known as "the berm" at the border between Syria and Jordan. Such strategic closes and the marginalization of the health needs of refugees since 2014 have increased the international visibility of the refugee and health crisis. This visibility has allowed Jordan to employ a combination of appeals to solidarity and blackmailing negotiation tactics to keep donors' attention despite continued refugee arrivals in Western states and the EU and the subsequent mounting "donor fatigue."

Blackmailing tactics have included threats to discontinue Jordan's open-door policies toward Syrian refugees, to reduce access to vital services for refugees, and to step back as a key Western security partner. As King Abdullah II of Jordan warned in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interview in 2016: "How can we be a contributor to regional stability if we are let down by the international community?" With refugees expected to reside in host countries for an average of two decades, the King reiterated the effects of hosting refugees on Jordan's host communities. "Sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," he stated ominously (BBC 2016).

The combination of blackmail and international appeals for solidarity toward refugees have yielded mixed results. The increased visibility of Syrian refugees, alongside Jordan's geostrategic position as an important ally to the US and other Western states, has ensured a constant flow of international humanitarian funding. More than a decade since the arrival of Syrian refugees, Jordan remains one of the top 10 recipients of humanitarian aid worldwide. Moreover, successful negotiation tactics resulted in the Jordan Compact, a novel agreement between donors and the Jordanian government that has guaranteed a constant stream of overseas development aid to Jordan in exchange for hosting Syrian refugees. The Compact has been hailed as a groundbreaking development and highlighted as an example to be emulated in future refugee crises (Arar 2017).

Yet health rentierism—as in the case of refugee rentierism—is generally only effective if the refugee host country can leverage fears that refugees and infectious diseases will cross borders into wealthy donor states. In the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan, strategies for health and refugee rentierism have been most successful with donors (such as EU member states) that have the greatest vested interest in preventing the onward movement of refugees toward Europe and the West (Lupieri 2020). For donors such as the US, which considers Jordan to be an important ally in the Middle East, the arrival of Syrian refugees has prompted unprecedented amounts of bilateral and multilateral aid to ensure the country's stability and security. Though the urgency of the Syrian refugee crisis had begun to fade among donors and their governments by 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked renewed interest in refugee health in Jordan.

COVID-19 and Concluding Remarks

The growing importance of health and health care policy in international relations has become increasingly apparent during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In many ways, the pandemic strengthened the link between migration, health, and security, cementing perceptions of refugees and migrants as potential carriers of infectious diseases. Fears of refugees spreading infectious diseases across borders, particularly among wealthy donor states, have encouraged various forms of health rentierism. In the wake of the pandemic, global health financing for infectious diseases has grown by 700% since 2019, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 virus and on preventing future epidemic outbreaks (IHME 2023). In Jordan, financing for Syrian refugees has once again increased after a brief slump between 2017 and 2019, with the spread of the novel coronavirus (European Commission 2020). There is even a new area of humanitarian and development aid, which focuses specifically on responding to COVID-19.

Despite increases in financing, however, the pandemic has also limited the effectiveness of health rentierism as a strategy for subverting some of the intrinsically unequal power dynamics between donors and refugee host states. Policies enacted at the height of the pandemic, which drastically restricted human movement, have reduced

legal avenues for migration and seeking asylum. Under the guise of public health measures aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus, such global policies have not only strengthened perceptions of refugees as dangerous to public health and security but have also drastically reduced their human rights, at times imprisoning asylum seekers in crowded, unsanitary camps (Lupieri 2021).

For instance, in March 2020, President Donald Trump enacted a public health policy called Title 42. This policy allowed US officials to turn away migrants who came to the US–Mexico border on the grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Although human rights organizations emphasized how Title 42 violated the rights of migrants and asylum seekers (Human Rights Watch 2021), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention highlighted its lack of effectiveness as a public health policy, Title 42 was only lifted in May 2023. With many borders around the world closed, such health policies have effectively reduced the effects of threats and bargaining from refugee host states in the Global South. As a result, states such as Jordan have increasingly resorted to appeals for solidarity to secure donor support.

It is my hope that future research will continue to expand on the framework of health rentierism and explore its applications in other contexts. For instance, in what ways—and under what circumstances—do refugee host states in the Middle East and elsewhere instrumentalize refugee health for political and material gain? Beyond refugee states, how do governments worldwide leverage health policies and medical aid as a form of rent? Such questions are especially relevant following the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing securitization of health and infectious diseases worldwide. Ultimately, it is as important as ever to understand the ways in which health and health care policies are a political endeavor—one that increasingly intertwines with national security concerns and migration control.

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Threatening Refugees:
Refugee Rentierism and Arms Deals in Jordan, 1967–77

Lillian Frost, Virginia Tech

Introduction

The large waves of Syrian refugees fleeing violence since 2012 have directed scholarly attention to the rents that neighboring states can extract from donors in exchange for receiving and "hosting" refugees (Tsourapas 2019). However, as Lynch and Tsourapas note in the introduction to this volume (2024), refugee rentierism is not solely a recent phenomenon, nor has it only been linked to keeping refugees out of Europe. Jordan, for example, has long leveraged its large Palestinian refugee population to extract aid from British, American, Arab Gulf, and Libyan governments in exchange for containing and controlling these refugees in Jordan. Despite this history of refugee rentierism, little scholarly attention has been devoted to its historical variations. How, then, have refugee host states secured and maintained refugee-related rents?

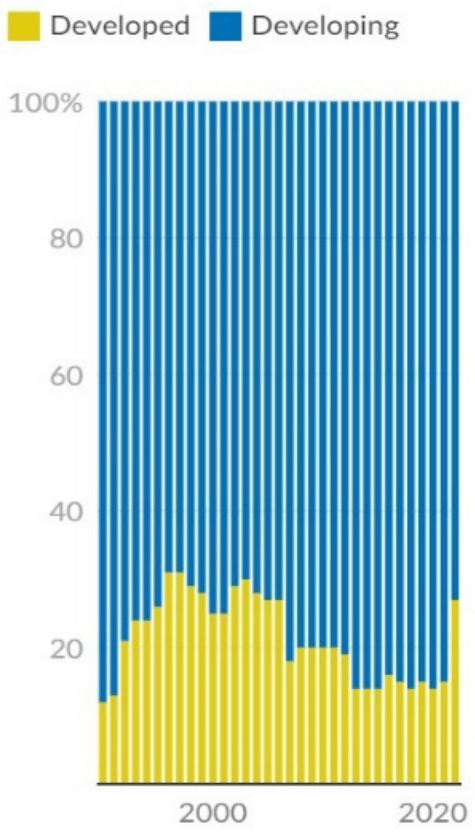
This paper addresses these questions by analyzing Jordan's refugee rentierism from 1967 to 1977. It starts with a discussion of data collection and case selection, before moving on to the argument and its implications. Overall, I find that Jordan secured and maintained refugee-related rents by successfully convincing donors that refugees could become major security threats, thereby connecting refugee and military assistance. In addition, the donors supplying such military assistance could help propagate refugee-related arms deals because of their commercial benefits. By emphasizing the threats refugees posed, Jordan's refugee rentierism in the case explored here is similar to the recent "blackmailing" strategies that states, such as Türkiye (Almasri 2024), applied to European donors as the Syrian refugee crisis escalated (Tsourapas 2019). Thus, many of the dimensions of Jordan's historic refugee rentierism remain present in state strategies today, including in Jordan, as elaborated in other pieces in this volume (Arar 2024; Lupieri 2024; Parker-Magyar 2024; and Dhingra 2024).

Data and Case Selection

The analysis uses British archival files on Jordan's internal politics to trace the dynamics surrounding Jordan's access to foreign aid after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. These files, which amount to thousands of documents, describe conversations among British, American, Jordanian, and other Arab state officials regarding aid and the justification for its continued issuance. Without publicly available archival files on this topic in Jordan and other Arab donor states, the British files are a valuable resource. Specifically, I reviewed every folder on aid, assistance, relief, refugees, the armed forces, police trainings, and the sale and export of military equipment from the UK to Jordan, as well as relevant folders on King Hussein's trips to the UK, US, and Arab donor states between 1967 and 1977. I also draw from US archival files collected in 2016 on Jordan's politics and refugees, though the US government had only released files, at that time, through 1973. The use of UK and US files inevitably privileges British and American perspectives on the refugee rentier dynamics. Regardless, these files help enhance our much-needed understanding of the historic context surrounding refugee rentierism.

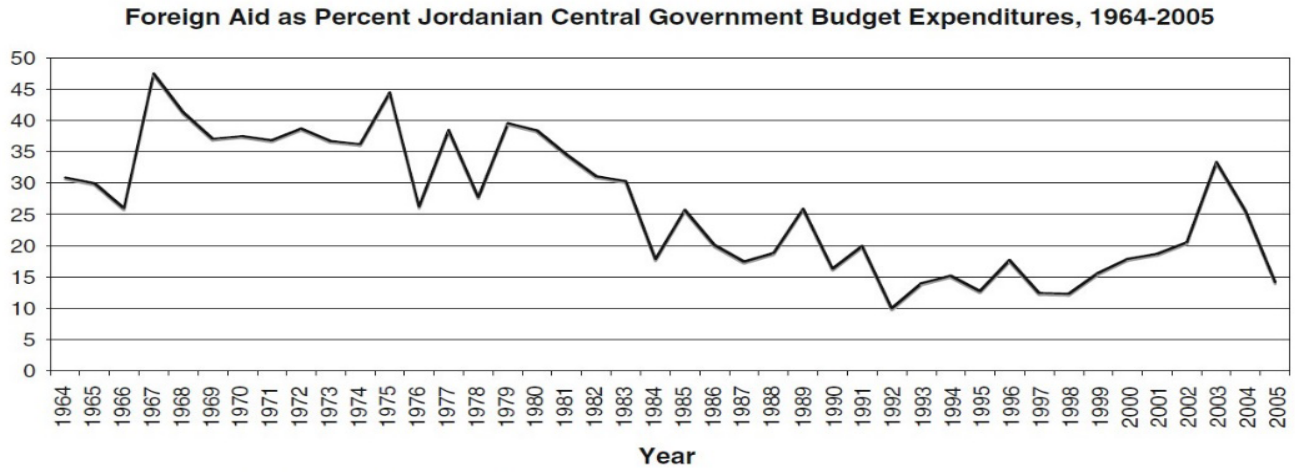
As perhaps the oldest refugee rentier state, Jordan is a critical case to understand. Moreover, as a "developing" state that neighbors refugee-sending countries, its basic context is similar to the states that host the majority of refugees. Specifically, in 2022, low- and middle-income states hosted 76% of all refugees, and neighboring states hosted 70% (UNHCR 2023, 2). In addition, as Figure 1 shows, "developing" states have long hosted the vast majority of refugees, ranging roughly between 85% from 2013 to 2021 and 70% in the late 1990s and early 2000s (UNHCR n.d.).

Figure 1: Share of Refugees Hosted in Developing Countries, 1990–2022 (UNHCR n.d.)



Moreover, Jordan's refugee rent-seeking after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War is particularly fruitful for developing explanations relevant to contemporary host states. One reason for this is that it represents the first period of major refugee reception without the heavy governing influence of British colonial officials. Although Jordan did receive substantial amounts of foreign aid following the 1948 Arab–Israeli War along with the 531,000 refugees the War brought within Jordan's borders,[1] the British provided much of this aid as a continuation of the budgetary and military support they had been providing since Jordan's independence from them—which Jordan gained nominally in 1946 but effectively in 1956. Thus, Jordan did not have to use the refugee population to convince the British to provide large sums of aid because this assistance likely would have continued even without the refugees, due to Britain's state-building and geopolitical aims in Jordan at the time. In addition, the foreign aid that Jordan received in the decade following the 1967 War historically constituted some of the largest percentages of Jordan's central government budget expenditures, as shown in Figure 2 below (Peters and Moore 2009, 269).

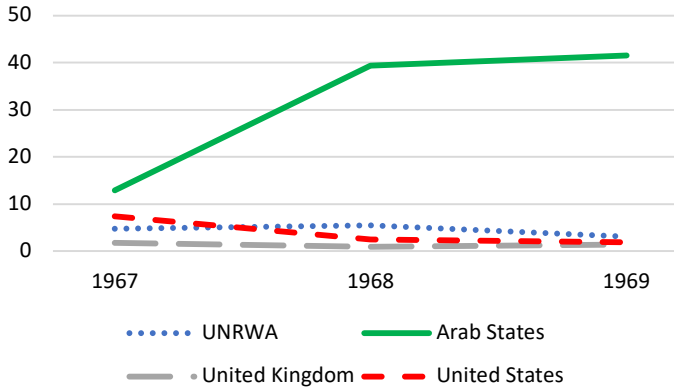
Figure 2: Foreign Aid as a Percentage of Jordanian Central Government Budget Expenditures, 1964–2005



Source: Central Bank of Jordan Yearly Statistical Series 2006; cited in Peters and Moore 2009, Fig. 1, page 269

Furthermore, the foreign aid following the 1967 War came from a variety of sources, producing numerous instances of refugee-related rent-seeking. Figure 3 below highlights available figures for the total amount of aid per year per major donor.[2] Jordan received much of this funding from Arab states due in part to the large number of Palestinian refugees it hosted on its now truncated territory (because Jordan lost the West Bank in the 1967 War). By February 1968, there were 110,000 "old" refugees from the West Bank (who were registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and had been resident on the West Bank since the 1948 War), 131,000 "new" refugees from the West Bank (who were displaced from their regular residences for the first time), and 20,000 refugees from Gaza (most of whom were registered with UNRWA and had been resident in Gaza since the 1948 War).[3]

Figure 3: External Financial Assistance to Jordan, 1967–1969 (in Millions of Jordanian Dinars)[4]



While UNRWA's aid went directly to assisting refugees, the other aid is better characterized as supporting Jordan's *hosting* of refugees through budget support, emergency grants, technical assistance, and development loans and grants.[5] Thus, only a small portion of this aid focused on *caring* for refugees, and the rest was connected to enabling Jordan to *contain* and *control* them. Jordan played a key role for Arab states in keeping Palestinians, en masse, out of other Arab states—or at least deportable if in those states for work or study—while keeping them close to Palestine to maintain pressure for their right of return. At the same time, Jordan helped Western donors, and indirectly Israel, by preventing Palestinian refugees from trying to return to Israeli-occupied areas (attempts that would result in Israeli forces either killing or arresting Palestinians) and from attacking Israeli forces (attacks that often resulted in counter-attacks on Jordanian territory). Although Jordan could not fully prevent either action, it did limit them, similar to Jordan's efforts today to control and contain Syrian (and other) refugees from going to Europe or supporting regional terrorist groups.

Argument

I argue that host states can secure and sustain refugee rent by connecting refugees to security threats that deeply concern wealthy donors. In the case explored here, the security threat was that the refugees could overthrow the Jordanian regime and its valuable presence to donors as a pro-Western, "moderate" force in the region. However, in other cases, such as Türkiye more recently, the threat could concern refugees' potential to cross into Europe or other donor states. When a refugee host state takes Jordan's approach and convincingly frames refugees as threats to its regime, that state can increase and extend refugee rents by connecting military assistance to the "burden" and "risk" of hosting refugees. In addition, the development of commercial benefits for donors to supplying military aid can amplify donor willingness to sustain refugee-related rents. A key manifestation of this security-refugee-aid nexus is the provision of arms deals to refugee host states.

These arguments support issue-linkage and supply–demand explanations of rentierism. With issue-linkage, refugee rentierism can expand when host states effectively link refugee assistance to donors' international security concerns, similar to the emergence of refugee rents that link refugee assistance to diplomatic concerns (Tsourapas 2019). For example, refugee host states can connect refugee maintenance and control to imperatives to strengthen the state's security apparatus, producing refugee rents in the form of arms deals.

With supply–demand dynamics, refugee rentierism highlights that the "supply" of large external rents alone

does not itself create a rentier state. Instead, the host state's "demand" for such rents sustains the process of extracting revenue from foreign actors to maintain refugee populations. In addition, the host state shapes the distribution and use of those rents (Peters and Moore 2009). For instance, host states can divert budgetary assistance to fund military salaries or purchases. Likewise, they can solicit rents in the form of arms deals. In either case, host states can use refugee-related rents to maintain the support of key constituencies. As such, they can engage these new institutional venues to distribute old forms of patronage (Marshall 2012). Moreover, when commercial benefits accrue to donors from providing these rents, they can overlook, or even play an active role in maintaining, such patronage dynamics (Jones 2012). Thus, both donors and recipients can pursue their financial interests through refugee politics.

Overall, these arguments highlight the links between foreign aid, arms purchases, and refugee-hosting that can enable refugee rentierism to endure and expand. The remainder of this paper will unpack these arguments by focusing on Jordan's refugee rent-seeking between 1967 and 1977. Specifically, it highlights that Jordan linked Palestinian refugees to security threats relevant to major donors, who viewed arms deals as key to "securing" Jordan. It then describes how these arms deals benefited donors commercially. The final section reflects on the implications of these arguments, including the blurring of developmental, economic, refugee, and military aid, which can make it difficult to halt military assistance. Altogether, the security-refugee-aid nexus observed in Jordan may be most applicable to host states that donors deem geo-strategically important.

Linking Palestinian Refugees to Security Threats

Jordanian leaders often connected Palestinian refugees to threats between 1967 and 1977. The first threat concerned the potential for Israeli forces to attack Palestinian refugee communities in Jordan's East Bank, based on refugee efforts to return to the West Bank as well as pro-Palestinian militants' (i.e., fedayeen) attacks on Israeli forces. Jordan needed stronger military and policing capabilities to prevent cross-border violence as well as to disincentivize Israel from reigniting the War and taking more of Jordan's land. The Vice President of the Jordan Development Board expressed this need to foreign donors in a report circulated during July 1967, in which he requested that foreign aid "shift from development to military budget" because the "aggressive acts carried out recently point to the necessity of maintaining a larger budget for military preparedness."[6]

Second, Jordanian officials characterized the socio-economic character of the 1967 refugees as a potential threat to the Jordanian regime, particularly without a peace settlement. Just after the War, Jordan's "Internal Security" reported concerns with the refugees "coming from the Jericho and Nablus refugee camps," who are "short of blankets and food" and where "morale is low and tempers run high."[7] In the same Jordan Development Board report referenced above, the Vice President explains that these refugees "belong to the last productive part of the population since a large number of them are UNRWA in-camp refugees."[8] Further, during a meeting with US President Johnson in November 1967, King Hussein focused on making "a very strong appeal for additional help for the new refugees" and asked about "arms and all military supplies for Jordan," conveying a link between Jordan's defense and refugee needs.[9]

Third, as months passed without Arab–Israeli peace negotiations, Jordanian leaders started to describe the refugees as fedayeen, who could challenge the ceasefire and threaten King Hussein's regime. In May 1968, King Hussein lamented that the internal situation in Jordan was "difficult" because "attempts at a peaceful settlement were not getting anywhere, the resistance movements growing, and there was pressure to accept Soviet offers of arms...There were many groups of Fedayeen and, given the thousands of refugees, it was very difficult to find out about them and control their activities."[10] The Jordanian Ambassador to the UK, in criticizing Israeli attacks on refugees in the East Bank, asked British officials "who were the Fedayeen but Jordanian civilians who had lost their

homes and been made refugees twice in the past twenty years?"[11]

As tensions grew between the fedayeen and the Jordanian state, the 1967 refugees—now essentially equivalent to the fedayeen—became direct threats to the Jordanian regime. The culmination of these tensions in the September 1970 War between the Jordanian army and fedayeen, backed by Syrian tanks, made these direct threats very real. By November 1970, British Colonel McLean reported that King Hussein intended "to change the role of the armed forces to meet an attack from anywhere—meaning Syria and Iraq—and not just from Israel," while recognizing that "the problem of the Palastinians [sic] still remains."[12] Even after Jordan defeated and expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization, which represented the fedayeen, senior police officers reported in August 1971 that "the main threat to the internal security of Jordan is that posed by the Fedayeen," which is "a by-product of the dispute with Israel," and "as there is no solution to the dispute in sight[,] the threat will be long term and the fedayeen/refugee problem a likely vehicle too for political attempts from outside to embarrass the Jordan government."[13]

As the next section demonstrates, Jordan's framing of the 1967 refugees as impoverished, angry, and subject to "radicalization" and militancy struck a chord with the national concerns of the US, the UK, and the Arab Gulf states, who feared the spread of communism and Arab radicalism as well as renewed fighting with Israel. In turn, this enabled Jordan to secure more assistance to support the military—the backbone of the Hashemite regime—and control its Palestinian refugees.

Arms Deals and Financing to "Secure" Jordan

American and British officials reacted to the threats that Palestinian refugees, as fedayeen, posed to King Hussein's survival—and Israel's security—by diverting more military aid to Jordan. During the November 1967 Anglo-American talks on aid to Jordan, officials agreed that "restoring Jordan's military strength was obviously of importance in re-establishing her stability" and "that King Hussein was the key to a settlement: he had a reasonable chance of succeeding, provided he retained the loyalty of the army."[14] The leader of the US delegation also affirmed that "arms were a more important factor in Jordan's future than economic or at any rate financial aid."[15]

King Hussein also linked his fate and ability to manage the Palestinian refugees with receiving greater support for Jordan's military and police forces. On March 7, 1968, he "admitted that sympathies with the Fedayeen were widespread," and that he could not always restrain army units commanded by junior officers because he had:

> "been out of touch with these people and had, in fact, avoided them for some time because he had nothing by way of new equipment to offer them. The American arms package changed that and he intended…to visit as many units as he could and personally make clear… where their duty lay."[16]

Essentially, King Hussein argued that he could not reduce support for the fedayeen, and thereby control threatening refugees, without military assistance. In May 1968, the US supplied a three-year $100 million arms package, and US officials reported in January 1969: "US rationale is that our arms supply to Jordan represents essential political support for Hussein," in the context of a "deteriorating" security situation, with cycles of fedayeen raids and Israeli reprisals, as well as the "irritant" of 600,000 UNRWA refugees.[17] In May 1970, the US Secretary of State asked President Nixon to approve a new arms package for Jordan, explaining that "it continues to be in our national interest that Hussein remain pro-West. We need him for a peace settlement, to help arrest the trend toward radicalization in the area, and to limit the level of hostilities in the Jordan area."[18] A key part of "limiting" hostilities concerned Jordan's ability to control Palestinian refugees, particularly the fedayeen among them.

While the Americans provided direct assistance to Jordan's armed forces, the less-resourced British were brokers with other states in this process. For example, in spring 1969, the British helped Jordan contract rifles from the Germans

to compete with the "kalashnikovs of the fedayeen," despite German bans on selling arms to "areas of tension."[19] These negotiations involved both urging "the Germans to bend their own policies" by sending the rifles to the UK,[20] despite knowing they would end up in Jordan, as well as helping King Hussein secure the funding for these rifles from Arab Gulf states.[21] Likewise, the British were heavily involved in negotiating the US sale of a missile air defense system to Jordan using Saudi funds in 1976.[22] Although these cases did not involve the sale of British arms, others between 1967 and 1977 did, which helped maintain British interest in facilitating Jordan's arms deals.

Commercial Benefits of Making Jordan "Secure"

Arms deals proliferated as donors accepted Jordan's portrayal as a "moderate" but vulnerable state, which, if adequately resourced, could contain Palestinian refugees and their potential for violence. These were key concerns for the US and UK, given Jordan's proximity to Israel, and for the Arab Gulf, considering Jordan's proximity to their own borders. Moreover, the British and Americans viewed these deals as an opportunity to support their commercial interests and clout in the region, while Arab states considered them an opportunity to negotiate their own arms deals with Western suppliers and to demonstrate their support of the Arab–Palestinian cause.[23] The financial assistance offered by Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Libyan—and, to a certain extent, Qatari, Bahraini, and Emirati—donors enabled Jordanian leaders to purchase US and British weapons, often in cash.

Shortly after the August 1967 Arab League Summit in Khartoum, during which Arab leaders pledged to support "confrontation" states, like Jordan, with large aid packages, the British started discussing economic opportunities. In November 1967, the British Embassy in Amman observed:

> "There are of course commercial advantages in having a continued stake in Jordan's economic development. The 'untied' Arab aid should offer even greater opportunities for British goods and services especially if Her Majesty's Government's technical assistance to Jordan were increased. This would […] facilitate British participation in the increased economic and commercial opportunities created by the Arab aid."

In 1968, British expectations came to fruition. For the first time, the British helped finance the sale of British Tigercats (short-range surface-to-air missile systems) to Jordan with Saudi assistance.[24] Embassy officials acknowledged that "the value of the order […] would be about 2.1 million pounds, and […] an export order of this size to Shortt Brothers, Belfast, would […] be a good reason for agreeing to this sale."[25] In August 1968, they also highlighted "our interest in future arms transactions" and the importance of offering the Saudis agreeable terms to avoid a "grievance which will prejudice our hopes of further arms sales here."[26] Likewise, British financial officials emphasized the commercial nature of this deal.[27] In the same month, King Hussein even wrote to the British Prime Minister, as the deal grew to include ammunition and tanks as well: "We feel that this deal, plus many others which we hope to raise funds for from our Arab sister states, might depend on a satisfactory agreement regarding the items mentioned above."[28] Soon after, the British Embassy in Amman suggested another commercial opportunity:

> "As far as the supply of new equipment is concerned, notably armoured scout cars, there could be commercial opportunities for us in the strengthening of the two Bedouin [police] detachments. We have heard that the Head of Public Security is toying with the idea of asking the King to let him take over from the Jordanian army used equipment [...] when and if the latter receives new equipment. It may be that ideas of this kind could increase the total Jordanian demand, both police and army, for armoured and scout cars, and that King Hussein will be prepared to allocate new funds given to him by other Arab countries following the Arab League conference of Foreign Ministers for this purpose [...] A vehicle which would meet their need very adequately in this respect would be the 'Shorland' manufactured by Short Brothers and Harland."[29]

Reflecting on these deals in September 1970, officials wrote that, in Jordan, "British investment is small but our position as major exporters and arms suppliers earned us a useful 30–40 million pounds in 1968."[30]

By 1972, there were also opportunities for Jordan to use US funds to purchase UK arms and equipment. In September, British conversations with US official Korn highlighted that the US wanted to keep this confidential: Korn "had to tell me frankly that the State Department would find itself in a very invidious position with Congress if it became widely known that other countries were selling large amounts of military equipment to the Jordanians on credit," and "by their generous budgetary assistance to Jordan the US was really subsidising the Jordanian budget […] where Jordan was in effect drawing on her American subsidy to make interest payments on credits for military equipment supplied by other countries." In October, British Foreign Office officials lobbied the financial offices to provide an "advance package deal" to expedite restocking Jordanian supplies using British credit but ultimately American funds, observing:

> "If we are unable to help the Jordanians to buy British spares and equipment now, we shall undoubtedly lose our present share of the military supplies market for the foreseeable future, particularly in view of the massive injection of American aid into Jordan […] [this] would not be a state of affairs we would willingly let come to pass."[31]

A British military report from February 1973 summarized that "the Americans provide the money and the British seem to provide goodwill," though it also lamented that "when we cannot offer military supplies on the easy credit terms which other countries are prepared to do we risk not being able to sell the quantities of arms which we would otherwise do."[32] Moreover, in 1977, the UK identified one of its key interests as maintaining a market share in Jordanian development.[33] Overall, commercial interests motivated British officials to act as brokers soliciting more money for Jordan, particularly "untied" money, from the US and Arab Gulf states.

Conclusion

Refugee host states, like Jordan, can amplify and sustain foreign assistance after receiving a large wave of refugees by emphasizing the security threats that the refugees could pose. In doing so, donors can view refugee and military assistance as serving the same goal of containing and controlling the refugees within the host state. Donors supplying military assistance can also propagate refugee-related arms deals because they are commercially beneficial. These dynamics highlight how host states can tie refugees to other justifications for aid, such as security needs. Thus, refugees serve as a key component—though not the only one—in obtaining more assistance.

However, one consequence of refugee-related arms deals is the blurring of aid that supports development, the economy, the military, and refugees. A British official summarized this issue:

> "I must however be allowed to make the fairly obvious point that defence expenditure which has accounted for some 40% of all Government expenditure plays a formidable role in the economy as a whole; I recall that when H.M.G. were maintaining the Arab Legion at a cost of 12m. [pounds] per annum, it was calculated that one in every five Jordanians was a direct pensioner of H.M.G […] Sir Richard Beaumont's draft considers that the defence forces 'will have to be revised and reduced'; but any reductions are bound to swell the number of unemployed and lead to an added strain in the civil budget and/or a revolution...[and it's] unrealistic to exclude the defence budget from consideration because this has been to a very large extent the mechanism whereby purchasing power was injected into the economy, which in its turn made possible the very rapid rate of economic growth which had occurred."[34]

Likewise, another British report adds that "approximately one-third of the population of Jordan is dependent on the Government's military expenditure and that the latter consequently reflects a large element of social relief in a

country suffering from much unemployment or under-employment."[35] Thus, this analysis suggests that decisions to link security, refugees, and aid can have long-term, difficult-to-reverse consequences.

Overall, this exploratory study highlights links between foreign aid, arms purchases, and refugee-hosting that can enable refugee rentierism to expand and endure. Although the analysis focused on a historical period, it highlights dynamics that may exist in Jordan, and perhaps other host states, today. For example, the conflation of humanitarianism and security is evident in Jordan's Azraq Syrian refugee camp (Gatter 2023). We can also see the securitization of Syrian refugees in other sectors, such as health care (Lupieri 2024), education (Parker-Magyar 2024), employment, housing, and other public services (Dhingra 2024). Thus, the portrayal of refugees as threats to host states need not be limited to physical, violent threats to be effective in obtaining or sustaining refugee-related aid. The security-refugee-aid nexus highlights rich avenues for future research exploring the different threats to which host states can link refugees in current and historic cases, as well as the implications of these dynamics.

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Migration Proxy Warfare:
Exploring the Role of Non-State Armed Actors in Libya's Refugee Rentierism

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Introduction

While the deployment of "migrants as weapons" by *states* in geopolitical confrontations is well documented (see Lynch & Tsourapas 2024), there remains a significant blind spot in migration scholarship: the role of non-state armed groups (NSAGs). I use the term "migration proxy warfare" to describe the phenomenon where states, in response to what they perceive as the complex challenges of migration, strategically delegate migration management tasks, traditionally within the sovereign domain of the state, to NSAGs. Importantly, this delegation is not rooted in a military struggle against another nation but is instead a strategic battle against the perceived challenge presented by migration itself. These challenges include securing borders, managing migration movements, dealing with the socio-economic impacts of mass migration, and navigating the political landscape that these migratory movements inevitably alter. Moreover, this delegation involves an inherent component of violence which manifests in two key dimensions: directly, through NSAGs' coercive measures against people on the move (such as arrests and detention), and, more subtly, through the structural violence embedded in the externalization of migration controls, where policies to curb migration inherently rely on force and coercion. Under this arrangement, NSAGs become instrumental surrogates for the state, engaged in controlling migration in ways that might be politically, legally, or morally challenging for states to do directly. Leveraging their delegated authority, these non-state entities not only adopt practices of "refugee rentierism"—traditionally attributed to states monetizing their migration control (see Tsourapas 2019)—but also wield their control over migration as diplomatic bargaining chips, in both domestic and international affairs.

The involvement of NSAGs in migration management is a global phenomenon, albeit with varying degrees of state interaction. For example, armed groups in northern Mali have taxed human smugglers and engaged in smuggling themselves, in a context where state presence is often minimal, although at times the Italian government is suspected of having been involved (Tinti 2022). In this essay, I study the case of Libya. Post-Qaddafi's 2011 fall, and already entrenched as an oil rentier state, Libya has been marked by a distinct and well-documented interaction between NSAGs and state mechanisms, involving both local governance structures and international state actors. The country's rentier economy, with its inherent variations in resource distribution and political influence between east and west Libya, provides a contextual backdrop for the emergence and operations of NSAGs in the region. From this turmoil a clear divide has emerged between the eastern region, led by the so-called Libyan National Army, and the western region, governed by the UN-recognized Government of National Accord. These two sides, supported by different international powers, have since been locked in a struggle for control and influence across Libya. Crucially, many of the militias that have emerged in the post-Qaddafi era have capitalized on Libya's strategic location in the central Mediterranean, turning the smuggling of Europe-bound migrants into a lucrative economy (Micallef 2017).[1] This has escalated the volume of migration movements, in turn accentuating Libya's geopolitical importance, culminating in the so-called "migration crisis" of 2015 when over a million people traveled to Europe to request asylum. In response to the perceived challenges associated with migration, the European Union (EU) and Italy introduced a series of initiatives for "migration management" in militia-dominated Libya (Kervyn & Shilhav 2017; Micallef *et al.* 2019).

In exploring NSAG-led refugee rentierism, one should consider the nature of these actors in the Libyan context. Post-Qaddafi Libya presents a particularly complex case

where the lines between state and non-state are not merely blurred but dynamically intertwined. Here, the concept of "hybrid" armed groups becomes salient (Badi 2020; Williams 2023). These groups operate with a degree of autonomy yet are enmeshed within the state apparatus, performing state functions while simultaneously exerting independent influence (see Badi 2020 and Williams 2023).[2]

To date, studies have concentrated predominantly on state-centric perspectives, often overlooking the complex roles of NSAGs (see e.g., Tsourapas 2019). Consequently, we lack a comprehensive understanding of these non-state actors, which can be instrumental in the geopolitical dynamics of migration. In this research I delve into the relationship between state and NSAGs using Libya as a case study. On the one hand, I explore how states harness NSAGs for migration control. On the other, I analyze how these armed groups, in turn, exploit their position for financial and political gain. Central to this exploration are the research questions: How do NSAGs in Libya engage in migration-related rent-seeking activities, and what roles do state actors play in facilitating these practices?

I adopt an exploratory case study approach, aimed at facilitating the development of theoretical frameworks through an inductive methodology. Given Libya's extensive coverage in academic inquiries and journalistic investigations, this study builds upon a rich archive of both academic and gray literature. Through this approach, I aim to contribute to the literature on migration in two main ways. First, I seek to introduce the concept of migration proxy warfare to describe the practice of outsourcing border control to NSAGs. Second, I aim to extend the concepts of "refugee rentierism" and "refugee commodification"—typically used to describe states—to embrace NSAGs.

State and Non-State Actors in Migration Proxy Warfare

The concept of proxy warfare traditionally pertains to external states empowering local actors to influence geopolitical scenarios. Adaptation of proxy warfare to the field of migration was first posited by Hintjens and Bilgic (2019), arguing that the EU's delegation of its border management tasks to other nations mirrors such warfare dynamics. This delegation allows states to undertake low-risk, covert interventions, benefiting from the shield of plausible deniability (Byman 2018; Groh 2019). However, where Hintjens and Bilgic's (2019) study primarily focused on state-to-state engagements, this paper extends its lens to NSAGs, with empirical underpinnings drawn from the Libyan context.

As mentioned, while the literature to date has focused largely on the role of state actors in shaping EU foreign policy, notably less attention has been dedicated to NSAGs.[3] When research has considered non-state actors, it has focused mostly on private security companies (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2015; Kumar 2020) or trade unions and employer associations (Menz 2008; Malit 2024). One exception is Pacciardi and Berndtsson's (2022) study that mentions "militias" when referring to non-state actors in seminal research on the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which was launched by the EU in 2015 in response to the "migration crisis" to address the "root causes" of migration in Africa. In their analysis, Pacciardi and Berndtsson (2022) underline the distinction between "externalization" (shifting border control beyond state boundaries) and "outsourcing" (delegating border control responsibilities to external state or non-state entities). Such a differentiation is key, as it underscores the multiplicity of actors in the migration arena and challenges state-centric analytical paradigms. Indeed, a surge in the "privatization" of the security domain has been observed (Kinsey & Berndtsson 2016), with non-state actors featuring prominently in roles involving border securitization (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2015).

As the influence of non-state entities increases, their roles are no longer restricted to mere sideline or isolated operations. Rather, they have begun to occupy spaces typically held by state actors, dictating and shaping regional dynamics. Tsourapas (2019) has been instrumental in analyzing the role of state actors in this dynamic, coining the concept of "refugee rentier states," defined as:

> "states that employ their position as host states or forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or refugee rent, from other state or non-state actors in order to maintain these populations within their borders." (Tsourapas 2019, p.465)

This concept draws its empirical foundation from the Middle East after 2011, where states like Türkiye (see Irgil 2024) and Jordan (see Almasri 2024; Arar 2024), as refugee-hosting states, adopted various strategies to procure substantial aid from the international community, a practice characterized as "rent-seeking." Building on this work, Freier *et al.* (2021, 2748) coined the concept of "refugee commodification," explained as "the transformation of forcibly displaced populations (and their hosting) into commodities subject to negotiation and trade in the marketplace."

Like Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon, actors in Libya have strategically positioned themselves to secure migration-related aid from the international community. However, the unique fragmentation of power post-Qaddafi and the significant role of NSAGs have set Libya apart. This essay delineates three key mechanisms by which these Libyan NSAGs have sought revenue from the international community.

The first involves militias integrating state security structures to formalize their role and benefit from any official foreign support received. The second is the adoption of containment and administrative roles, leveraging territorial influence to benefit from state procurement, which in the case of migration management also benefits from foreign support. The third is engagement in diplomatic negotiations with foreign state actors with the aim of securing direct financial support. All three cases represent both direct and indirect methods of rent-seeking support, adding nuance to current literature. Before exploring these mechanisms, the subsequent section charts the EU and Italy's evolving approach to migration in Libya, highlighting the transition from a border security focus in the late 1990s to a multifaceted engagement with Libyan militias after 2011.

The EU and Italy's Migration Strategy in Libya

Beginning in the late 1990s, the EU, spearheaded by Italy, sought to regulate migration movements from Libya. Their strategy centered on strengthening Libya's security infrastructure through training, equipment provision, and the creation of detention centers for migrants (Pacciardi & Berndtsson 2022). During Qaddafi's rule, Libya's approach to migration was deeply entwined with its rentier state status, as Qaddafi frequently used the threat of releasing people to Europe as leverage in negotiations, particularly with Italy. This practice effectively laid the groundwork for an early form of refugee rentierism (Tsourapas 2021), where the state harnessed its geopolitical position and control over migration as a tool of foreign policy and economic gain. The 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation saw Italy agree to pay $5 billion over 25 years as reparations for colonial misdeeds, in exchange for Libya's commitment to combat irregular migration and invest in Italian companies (Ronzitti 2009).

After Qaddafi's fall in 2011, a power vacuum ensued, leading militias to capitalize on the booming human smuggling economy, filling the void left by a destabilized state apparatus (Micallef 2017). However, from 2015 onward, sensing both the shifting political landscape and a pivot in international strategies (e.g., the 2015 EUTF), many of these militias began transitioning from smuggling to law enforcement roles, as both a survival strategy and a lucrative source of revenue (Micallef & Reitano 2017). They took over the management of detention centers, while also actively presenting themselves as legitimate law enforcement allies, aiming to improve their legitimacy both locally and internationally (Malakooti 2019; Micallef *et al.* 2019). This shift led to a marked decrease in migrant departures post-2018, even though smaller-scale militia-facilitated smuggling operations continued (Micallef *et al.* 2021).

The shift toward law enforcement roles was reportedly facilitated by the Italian government, which sponsored the transformation of several militias into coastal guard forces (Cusumano & Pattison 2018; Micallef & Reitano

2017). Marco Minniti, who was Interior Minister from December 2016 to June 2018, oversaw a huge reduction in the recorded number of migrants reaching Italian shores from Libya (Wintour 2017). In February 2017, he secured a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UN-recognized Libyan government in Tripoli, which was endorsed by EU leaders and renewed in 2020. The agreement sought to prevent departures from Libya and manage returns using EU funding, including the provision of dozens of patrol vessels to the Libyan coastguard and vehicles to the police. The exact number of vehicles and vessels is difficult to provide, since contract details remain opaque and the Italian Ministry of Interior retains the authority to determine the disclosure of contracts related to these initiatives (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). Consequently, many contracts have remained undisclosed, effectively limiting public scrutiny of the projects.

In the subsequent subsections, I will examine what has been uncovered from these initiatives with the objective of showing how NSAGs have engaged in migration diplomacy and rent-seeking. I will first look at the support extended to the Libyan coastguard and militia involvement therein. Next, I will discuss the establishment of militia-run detention centers. I will then explore collaboration with militias in southern Libya for border control.

Capacity-Building and Training of Libya's Militia-Integrated Coast Guard

With Libya's splintered power dynamics, the UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli, established in December 2015, progressively integrated influential militias into its border control strategies to help consolidate power (Badi 2020; Pack 2016). Many armed groups, once involved in migrant smuggling, were drawn by the allure of legitimacy, safety, and financial gain that came with state recognition (Micallef & Reitano 2017). As such, several armed factions seamlessly transitioned into official entities, such as the Libyan Coast Guard.

Since 2017, the EU has extended at least €42 million in support to the Libyan Coast Guard, mostly through the Italian government (EU Commission 2021a). As part of the Libyan Coast Guard structure, militias have adeptly used EU funding to play an integral role in migration control. Their integration was solidified by the EU's financial backing and training, including through the provision of new vessels and vehicles (OHCHR 2023). However, this cooperation raised serious concerns over consistent reports of coast guard members' involvement in smuggling, trafficking, and severe mistreatment of people on the move (Kervyn & Shilhav 2017, 202; Malakooti 2019; Tondo 2021a).

A notorious example of coast guard involvement in illicit activities is the case of Abdal-Rahman al-Milad, known as Bija. From militia leader and infamous human smuggler and trafficker, he became Coast Guard Commander of the Zawiya sector (Tondo 2021a). In 2017, the UN Panel of Experts on Libya found Bija to be complicit in killing migrants, including through the deliberate sinking of boats (UNSC 2017), leading to his sanctioning by the UN Security Council in 2018 (UNSC 2018). Bija's case is not an isolated event; militias have been a major component of the coast guard, especially in western Libya (Malakooti 2019). Furthermore, the Libyan Coast Guard has been accused of engaging in aggressive practices against people on the move, including opening fire on vessels and subjecting people to mistreatment during sea interceptions (Tondo 2021b).

While aiming to bolster the coast guard's effectiveness in reducing irregular migration to Europe, the EU has provided militias with equipment and training. This support enhances their operational capacity, which has also improved their capacity for smuggling activities and, over time, could undermine attempts at political stability (Moore 2023). On their side, by engaging in active security apparatus roles, Libyan militias have not only bolstered their domestic influence but also enhanced their stature on the global scene, establishing themselves as pivotal actors in regional migration dynamics.

Militias in the Detention Center Economy

While some militias have focused on more active security roles in stemming irregular migration, others have engaged

more in containment and administration for migration management, exemplified in their running of Libyan detention centers where migrants are typically detained following interception. This shift toward administrative functions, particularly in the management of detention facilities, represents a distinctive aspect of the Libyan context, where NSAGs' roles are deeply entrenched in migration control policies.

Established in 2012, the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) was created to regulate and oversee detention centers in Libya, with a vision to bring militia-run centers under state purview (Malakooti 2019). Between December 2016 and August 2021, the EU earmarked €19,800,000 for "supporting protection and humanitarian repatriation and reintegration of vulnerable migrants in Libya," including an unspecified amount for the DCIM to improve reception of migrants upon disembarkation (EU Commission 2021b).

Despite state endorsement, however, many detention centers still rely on militias for their daily operations, indicative of their deep-seated influence in Libya (Malakooti 2019). A testament to militias' entanglement in state affairs was the appointment of Mohamed al-Khoja, a notorious militia leader, as the DCIM Director in December 2021 (Urbina 2021). Previously, Al-Khoja had been linked to the Tariq al-Sikka detention center in Tripoli, a facility infamous for its systemic human rights abuses, including rape and torture (Human Rights Watch 2019; Urbina 2021).

Militias do much more in these detention centers than mere rent-seeking in return for their management role: they have capitalized on their position and capacity for violence to monetize migration in other ways. For instance, there have been documented cases of staff extorting money from detained migrants, using them under forced labor arrangements, and, in some extreme cases, subjecting them to torture (Bish *et al.* 2024; Malakooti 2019; Micallef *et al.* 2021). Therefore, militias not only secure a continuous revenue stream from the EU-funded DCIM—consolidating their position in the state's migration governance framework—but they also help generate additional revenue from illicit means.

The ramifications of such militia-led detention centers are multifaceted. On one level, the situation showcases the ability of NSAGs to institutionalize their operations, essentially co-opting state systems for their financial benefit. On another level, the situation casts a shadow on state–militia collaborations, raising serious questions about the ethical and moral integrity of such partnerships, especially considering recurrent human rights violations. The support extended to these militias, intended to streamline migration management, inadvertently amplifies their influence, power, and ability to exploit vulnerable people.

Geopolitical Bargaining of Southern Militias

While the two NSAG engagements with international support mentioned above were indirect, namely receiving funds by integrating themselves into the UN-recognized Libyan state apparatus, militias in southwestern Libya have also leveraged their control over vital migration corridors to directly seek international support through diplomacy (see also Yahmi 2024). These armed groups include the likes of the Tebu-dominated group Desert Shield (also called Sahara Shield), founded by Barka Wardougou after Qaddafi's fall, and comprise many former and current smugglers (Tubiana *et al.* 2018). Since late 2019, Desert Shield has collaborated with the Khalid Bin Walid Brigade and other militias to oversee the extensive southwestern border of Libya, particularly managing the Toummo crossing between Niger and Libya (ICG 2017, p. 201; Micallef *et al.* 2021).

Several investigations have suggested that, beyond official collaborations through the EUTF, Libyan militias may have received financial incentives from Italian security entities in a bid to stem irregular migration at Libya's southern borders (Marchesi 2022; Micallef & Reitano 2017; Michael 2017;). An indication of such covert relations can be seen in Minniti's 2017 acknowledgment of building ties with NSAGs in the Libyan Sahara, which he described as the

"guardians of the southern border," though he has refuted accusations of direct bribes (Pellerin 2018; Wintour 2017).

Further pointing to this alignment, a month after the 2017 Italy–Libya MoU was signed, key representatives from the Awlad Suleiman and Tebu communities—two historically conflicting ethnic groups in southern Libya with strong ties to the human smuggling economy through their armed factions—attended a critical meeting in Rome. This gathering, under the umbrella of the Italian Interior Ministry, reportedly generated among the Libyan delegates expectations of substantial economic opportunities and potential compensation for inter-community warfare (Tubiana *et al*. 2018).

Whether money was exchanged or not, such diplomatic maneuvers show how armed groups in Libya have engaged in migration rent-seeking and migration diplomacy (Adamson & Tsourapas 2019; Ceccorulli 2022), highlighting the substantial geopolitical influence such groups can command. Moreover, these interactions may yield other, non-monetary benefits (see Worrall 2024).

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to outline both how states have used NSAGs for migration control and how NSAGs have sought material benefits from their position of control over people on the move. Using Libya as a focal point, I have identified three distinct mechanisms through which armed actors have sought migration rent. First, they have adopted active security roles, integrating state security structures like the Libyan Coast Guard, benefiting from EU funding, and bolstering their influence in regional migration dynamics. Second, by managing detention centers, they have capitalized on public procurement and further diversified their revenue streams through ransoming and trafficking. Third, they have sought financial support by leveraging their capacity for violence and direct negotiations with foreign governments.

The first two mechanisms illustrate how militias have adopted both proactive enforcement roles and reactive administrative roles in migration management. The third mechanism shifts the focus from operational and administrative facets of migration management to the strategic and political dimensions, underscoring how armed groups leverage their control over migration routes to negotiate directly for financial and political advantages. This third mechanism is particularly intriguing because it emphasizes the militias' evolution from mere operational actors to influential diplomatic entities that can bypass traditional state-to-state channels. It highlights how militias can enhance their influence by leveraging migration control, transitioning from ground-level operations to strategic, high-level negotiations.

In outlining the mechanisms through which NSAGs in Libya have used their position to make diplomatic or financial profits, I have also highlighted how states can use these armed groups to their advantage. In doing so, I have compared this engagement to proxy warfare, where the use of local actors allows for an outsourcing and externalization of border control, which often takes place through certain forms of violence or coercion. The use of non-state entities by states blurs the lines of accountability (López-Sala & Godenau 2020), which ultimately enables impunity for maltreatment of vulnerable populations in transit.

It is crucial to acknowledge the inherent risks associated with such security engagements. In situations perceived to demand immediate security responses, alliances with non-state factions can intensify latent socio-political tensions, potentially destabilizing the region further (ICG 2017). Such hybrid security arrangements might hinder the development of a coherent and effective Libyan security sector by perpetuating power fragmentation within the country (Herbert 2019). Moreover, these temporary solutions often fail to reach their initial intended objectives in the long run. Over time, NSAGs may find the allure of stable and lucrative profits from illicit economies (see e.g., Bish 2021) more compelling than the incentives states might offer for cooperation in migration management.

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Endnotes

[1] In this article I use the term "non-state armed group" interchangeably with "militia." Both refer to armed organizations that operate independently of official state military control, yet often intersect with state functions, particularly in the domain of migration management. Although the term NSAG encompasses a wide array of groups, this research focuses on those entities in the Libyan context that parallel what are commonly understood as militias, that is, groups that may have varying degrees of organization, stability, and interactions with state actors and international entities.

[2] This paper remains focused on the cross-border implications of NSAG-led migration dynamics rather than the internal displacement and state-making processes during civil war, as examined by Fröhlich and Müller-Funk (2023). Accordingly, in-depth discussion on "Forcing exit, selective return and strategic laissez-faire" is outside this paper's purview.

[3] This oversight may stem from a combination of factors: first, the historically covert nature of NSAG activities, which might have eluded academic scrutiny, and, second, the relatively recent recognition of their overt involvement in migration management, particularly in contexts like Libya, where their interaction with state mechanisms and international actors has become gradually more pronounced and documented.

The Intersection of Refugee Rentierism and Domestic Politics:
The Anti-Refugee Far-Right in Türkiye

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Introduction

How is refugee rentierism reflected in domestic politics, and how is rentier state behavior adopted by domestic political actors? Refugee rentierism refers to state behavior that commodifies refugees to extract material gain or to maintain power and control over populations (Tsourapas 2019). This phenomenon has gained attention in recent years due to the Syrian refugees' arrival in other countries, including neighboring states, particularly in the Middle East (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). Refugee rentierism, which can take a variety of forms ranging from rent-seeking to the weaponization of refugees (Greenhill 2010), commodifies refugees as a tool in diplomacy. It analyzes how other state policies can be used in exchange for this commodification, such as development aid for burden sharing, border control regulations, and labor opportunities for the citizens as well as refugees (Yahmi 2024). This theoretical perspective encompasses an exploration of how nations situated in the Global South commodify refugees as a means to extract material resources from their counterparts in the Global North. This approach could be enriched through closer attention to the repercussions of refugee rentierism on *domestic* politics in the Middle East (Dhingra 2024; Irgil, Norman, and Tsourapas 2023).

Discussions of domestic politics in the Global South overlap with the rise of anti-refugee far-right sentiment in the Global North, as evidenced in the rhetoric of political parties in the European Union (EU) in the last decade. Western political party literature has focused on the immigration issue, highlighting economic grievances, security concerns, and cultural differences between the citizens and the refugees (Chueri 2022; Downes, Loveless, and Lam 2021; Heisbourg 2015; Kayran 2022; Mudde 2016). Framed as "populist discourses" (Hogan and Haltinner 2015), anti-refugee, or anti-immigrant in a broader sense, such rhetoric follows a similar path in political discourse as that concerning nationalism and xenophobia. Fueled by "exclusionary populism" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) to appeal to the general public in the democracies of the Global North, these parties are driven by scapegoating and advocate a range of restrictive policies, from containing refugee spillover to nationalistic economic policies that prioritize natives. Anti-refugee far-right parties, through populist discourse, exploit anti-refugee sentiment to gain and secure political power, often based on the belief that refugees pose a threat to national identity and security. In the Global North, anti-refugee parties also emphasize the anti-Islamic discourse, which is framed as conflicting with Western values (Akkerman 2005; Betz and Meret 2009).

However, what is overlooked is the reflection of anti-refugee far-right discourses in refugee rentier states' domestic politics and the emergence of anti-refugee far-right political parties in the countries of the Global South, which has led to diversification of refugee commodification (Almasri 2024). Most of the refugees in the Middle East come from neighboring states, so the host society and refugees share common elements, mainly religion. But anti-refugee rhetoric has fueled the rise of populist attitudes and parties in the Middle East, manifesting itself as refugee rentierism in domestic politics through political rather than material gains.

In this contribution, I focus on the establishment and rise of the anti-refugee far-right Victory Party (ZP) in Türkiye. Syrians started coming into Türkiye in 2011. Refugee migration had not been a prominent issue within domestic politics for years and only gained traction after the local elections in March 2019. This is noteworthy considering that, between 2011 and 2019, Türkiye had

seven elections—two presidential elections, four general elections (one of which was held simultaneously with one of the presidential elections), and two local elections. Moreover, studies found no significant impact of Syrian refugee inflow on election outcomes between 2012 and 2016 (Altındağ and Kaushal 2021; Fisunoğlu and Sert 2019), and the refugee issue was not a key component of electoral campaigns until 2019 (Yanasmayan, Ustubici, and Kasli 2019). However, following the local elections in the summer of 2019, the unexpected defeat of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in major cities including Istanbul, coinciding with decreasing public support for Erdoğan and economic instability (Biskin and Babat 2019), marked a turning point in domestic politics.

This turning point paved the way for the commodification of refugees in domestic politics, which occurred in the electoral campaign in the national and presidential elections of May 2023, when Ümit Özdağ, the leader of the anti-refugee Victory Party, exploited these tensions by commodifying the refugees as a topic for political gain. Özdağ is an experienced figure in Turkish politics, having served as a member of parliament and deputy leader for the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) until 2016. Subsequently, he joined the right-wing Good Party (IYIP), where he also served as deputy leader before being dismissed for disregarding fundamental principles such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Avundukluoğlu 2020). Consequently, when Özdağ founded the Victory Party, he already had a well-established political presence (Irgil and Balcioglu 2022; Tahiroglu 2022).

This is not to argue that anti-refugee statements are new in Turkish domestic politics and specific to the Victory Party, as other opposition parties (with the exception of the Peoples' Democratic Party [HDP]) also adopted anti-refugee rhetoric to criticize the incumbent's refugee policy and foreign policy (Yanasmayan, Ustubici, and Kasli 2019). However, the first example of an explicitly anti-refugee far-right political party in Türkiye advances our knowledge of political party behavior in the context of the Middle East, especially since the discussions concerning Türkiye and the Syrian refugees have been cast predominantly in an international framework, focusing on Türkiye's refugee commodification strategies—known as "refugee rentierism"—and how they influenced its relations with the EU (Tsourapas 2019; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Norman 2020).

Therefore, I argue that refugee rentierism is not limited to political incumbents or the state; other political domestic actors also commodify the refugee issue, extending refugee rentier state behavior into domestic politics in ways that make potential domestic political actors relevant that might have been irrelevant otherwise. Focusing on the example of the Victory Party, I demonstrate these arguments by detailing the refugee rentier behavior in domestic politics in which the refugee issue is a bargaining chip for political power (see Figure 1).

I further argue that, although the politics differ regarding the content, populist discourse in the Global South enables the use of refugees as a bargaining chip for political power in the same way that it does in the Global North. Hence,

Figure 1: Domestic levels of refugee rentierism in Türkiye

I contribute to the literature on refugee rentierism by expanding its focus on the commodification of refugees as a bargaining chip at the domestic level by demonstrating an example from the Middle East that could be expanded to similar cases in the region and the broader Global South where the host community and refugees have common elements.

The Victory Party in Turkish Politics

The 2016 EU–Turkey Deal engendered a prevailing public sentiment that refugees have a more enduring presence in Türkiye (Erdoğan 2018), hence discussions about refugees in domestic politics were mostly concerned with the number of registered and unregistered Syrians in Türkiye (Holleis and Knipp 2022), the number of Syrians who had been granted citizenship (Koser Akcapar and Simsek 2018), and the escalating frequency of criminal activities involving—and those directed against—Syrians (International Crisis Group 2018). In 2020, political parties began issuing statements on how to address the Syrian refugee situation, leading to the commodification of refugees and creating a political space for domestic political gain. These public discussions intensified over the following years, particularly with the noticeable influx of Afghan and Iraqi refugees, resulting in a significant anti-refugee sentiment.

Capitalizing on this sentiment, the anti-refugee far-right Victory Party emerged in August 2021 under the leadership of Özdağ. The primary objective of this party is to target and repel immigrants and refugees. Previously, far-right political parties in Türkiye, such as the MHP, focused on nationalism and opposed ethnic minorities like the Kurds. The Victory Party broadcasts anti-refugee rhetoric specifically, relentlessly propagates such views, and shapes the domestic political landscape on the issue. This is akin to nationalist movements in Europe, but the Victory Party uses refugees as a bargaining chip even in non-refugee-related matters, such as supporting a presidential candidate.

The Victory Party outlines its anti-refugee strategy through a three-step approach: first, proposing the repatriation of Syrians as an immediate measure to address the current situation; second, advocating for long-term measures to prevent future waves of migration; and third, promoting the return of the Turkish diaspora to the country, coupled with social and economic reforms. The 2021 Party Manifesto harshly criticizes the "Palace Regime," referring to President Erdoğan, and its refugee policy. Proposing the change in foreign policy through criticism of the incumbent's policies, the manifesto states: "the fundamental changes in the foreign policy, of course, involves the relations with the EU and rather than relations based on tension, we will aim for policies that will be beneficial to both sides." Notably, the manifesto emphasizes the perceived negative impact of Syrians on Türkiye, portraying the party as the last defense of the Turkish nation and characterizing the influx of refugees and immigrants as a deliberate, strategic attempt to alter demographics and disrupt the nation's unity.

Refugee Rentierism in Domestic Politics

The AKP regime decided to host refugees in Türkiye, and it continues to support the hosting of refugees (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2023). This creates a discursive space in which other political actors can challenge the incumbent's refugee policies, as evidenced in the frequency with which aspects of the topic appear in critical domestic and foreign policy debates, even though it is hard to differentiate parliamentary parties' stances on the issue (Apaydın and Müftüler-Baç 2021).

However, the Victory Party, which is not in the parliament and differs from other political parties in Türkiye, has always adopted the anti-refugee stance as its core ideology. In its Party Manifesto (2021: 6-10), the Victory Party claims that: "Erdoğan and his consultancy team encourage Syrians to stay and believe that racism is actually targeted at Turks." The manifesto also criticizes the opposition parties by calling them "Yellow Opposition [Sarı Muhalefet]" in reference to the term "Yellow Union [Sarı Sendika]," which

collaborates with employers and prioritizes their interests rather than employees' interests (Irgil and Balcioglu 2022). Reiterations of this stance intensified and reached a peak in the election period before the May 2023 presidential and general elections. Moreover, up to the end of the first round, the Victory Party was critical of both the incumbent and the opposition parties and put forward its own, third, presidential candidate, Sinan Oğan. Oğan gained 5.17% of the votes, Erdoğan gained 49.51%, and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the main opposition presidential candidate, gained 44.88%. Thus, the presidential election process went to a second round with a parliament composed mostly of nationalist parties, indicating that the general public had a tendency for nationalism (Hamsici 2023) and rousing speculation as to who Oğan, hence Özdağ, would endorse.

Building on this nationalist tendency and its well-known stance against refugees, the Victory Party adopted a refugee rentier behavior within domestic politics, which I view as an extension of the incumbent's refugee rentier state behavior. I contend that, unlike refugee rentierism at the state level, which commodifies refugees *as a population*, refugee rentierism at the domestic level commodifies refugees *as an issue* that becomes a bargaining chip for political power in domestic politics.

Demonstrating a clear example of the bargaining process, the 14-day period between the first and second rounds of voting was dominated by the question of "who will support whom." On May 22, it became clear that Sinan Oğan was going to endorse Erdoğan and encourage his voters to support him too (BBC News Turkce 2023). However, Kılıçdaroğlu also asked Özdağ for his endorsement in an attempt to attract nationalist votes. On May 24, four days before the runoff, Özdağ and Kılıçdaroğlu announced their collaboration and signed an official protocol with the leader of the Victory Party (Yazicioglu and Karabulut 2023). The first two points in this seven-point protocol focused on protecting Turkishness. In the third point, both sides agreed to send back "all the refugees and immigrants within a year, starting with the Syrians" (Sayin 2023). As it is well known what the Victory Party stands for and in support of, which is the return of refugees, tightened border policy, and restrictive migration policy, its endorsement of Kılıçdaroğlu signaled agreement on a shared ideology and was sealed by the protocol. Thus, although the Victory Party was not represented in parliament in the latest national elections, legitimizing its ideology among other domestic political actors marked it as a crucial actor and made it relevant in contemporary political debate.

Following the runoff and the loss of the opposition party leader as the presidential candidate, the protocol became obsolete. Whether there will be further deals with the Victory Party remains to be seen. However, the Victory Party and its leader's constant criticism of the incumbent's stance on refugees, as per the EU–Turkey Deal, continues. After the elections, Özdağ stated in a media interview that: "We wanted the Interior Ministry to have leverage over the EU–Turkey Deal, where this leverage could have made the topic of refugees a core issue in Turkish public opinion" (Zafer Partisi [Victory Party] 2023a). While whether the Interior Ministry has been unofficially offered to Özdağ has not been confirmed by the protocol's other parties, the anti-refugee far-right Victory Party dwells on the refugee issue to criticize both the incumbent and the EU to consolidate its presence as a crucial domestic actor with bargaining power.

Brief Emphasis on the Differences Within Cultural Proximity

Based on the discourses adopted by the Victory Party, I further argue that this bargaining for political power is enabled through a populist discourse, much like its counterparts in the Global North, yet differs regarding the content of the discourse due to cultural proximity, which refers to the objective elements shared by different individuals and groups (Adida 2011), between the host country and the arriving population. Focusing on this, Adida (2011) analyzed the integration of the incomers into host societies in culturally similar contexts and found that the immigrant community leaders emphasized the differences between the two groups, such as ethnic cleavages. As the extensive literature on anti-refugee

far-right party politics demonstrates, in the Global North, mainly Europe, such parties and their leaders promote anti-Islamic elements as the primary difference between refugees and the host communities, in addition to the rhetoric of economic grievances and security (Akkerman 2005; Betz and Meret 2009; Kayran 2022; Mudde 2016). Adopting specifically "populist" and "exclusionary" discourses (Hogan and Haltinner 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), anti-refugee far-right parties in the Global North scapegoat refugees as the source of multiple issues and prioritize host community members.

Such discourses are also evident in culturally similar contexts, which I demonstrate with the example of the Victory Party and its leader Ümit Özdağ, through highlighting differences within the similarities. Considering the shared element of religion, that is, precluding the anti-Islamic rhetoric employed in the Global North, Türkiye and Syria are considered culturally proximate, which is supported by Syrian refugees' perceptions of both host community members and Türkiye as a country (Kaya 2017). This has also been one of the key points highlighted by Erdoğan to accept refugees, namely to "host our religious brothers and sisters" and to legitimize humanitarian aid (Korkut 2016). However, this cultural proximity has not been reciprocated by host community members, as shown by a survey conducted with both the host society and the refugees in Türkiye (Erdoğan 2018).

This sentiment of the host community and "exclusionary discourse" on ethnic differences is the very attitude being reiterated by the Victory Party. In addition to its manifesto, the Party Program (2021) uses the term "silent invasion" to refer to ongoing refugee arrivals, constantly reiterating the ethnic and racial differences between the refugees and host community members.[1] Like the anti-refugee political parties in the Global North, this "silent invasion" also emphasizes security threats posed by the incoming population. However, this threat is linked to the refugee rentier state behavior of the incumbent and how that behavior has allowed refugees to come to Türkiye, hence the security threat. For instance, Özdağ stated in one of his media appearances that "Erdoğan said, 'We made the EU a safer place by limiting the arrival of millions of refugees' and I ask, 'Were you [Erdoğan] able to provide the safety of your youth in Turkey?'" (Zafer Partisi [Victory Party] 2023b). Linking this aspect to the differences within similarities, the Victory Party situates itself in domestic politics by stressing Turkishness, Turkic ancestry, and conflict between Turks and Syrians to fuel the security aspect of "exclusionary" and "populist" anti-refugee far-right discourses.

Conclusion

Delving into the domestic political implications of refugee rentierism, I have analyzed the anti-refugee far-right Victory Party in Türkiye. I argue that refugee rentierism, characterized by commodification of refugees for material gain or political control, often goes beyond international dynamics and deeply influences domestic politics. This analysis reveals the rise of anti-refugee parties, such as the Victory Party, and how it harnesses the growing tension around refugees in Türkiye's political landscape, enabling refugee commodification at the domestic level.

The Victory Party, although not successful in securing parliamentary seats, effectively infiltrated Türkiye's political discourse by promoting an anti-refugee stance and commodified the refugees as an issue in domestic politics, unlike the commodification of refugees as a population at the state level. Emphasizing the differences rather than similarities within the cultural proximity of host community members and refugees, the Victory Party adopted an "exclusionary populist" discourse to commodify refugee rentierism as an issue. This allowed to establish the position of the Victory Party in domestic politics and consolidate an ideology that unites anti-refugee far-right discourses. Demonstrating an example of an anti-refugee far-right party in the Middle East, hence the Global South, the establishment of the Victory Party and its use of the refugee issue as rentierism as a topic for blackmailing in domestic politics has the potential to be expanded to similar contexts of forced migration. Considering the importance of refugee rentierism in the Middle East and contemporary cross-border mobility

in the region, refugee rent-seeking will be one of the influential topics in regional discussions as more actors at different levels adopt the same behavior (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024).

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Endnotes

[1] This term was later used as the title of the short film that was uploaded to YouTube in which Özdağ announced on Twitter that he had funded the film.

"We Fund Their Political Projects":
Refugee and IDP Rentierism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Introduction

As of September 2023, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) hosts one million displaced people, including refugees from Syria, Iran, Türkiye, and Palestine, as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from elsewhere in Iraq. Syrian refugee numbers in the KRI have surged to more than 260,000, constituting 97% of all Syrians currently residing in Iraq (UNHCR Iraq Factsheet 2023). Additionally, some 40,000 non-Syrian refugees and asylum seekers have registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR) in Iraq. Of these, the KRI hosts 7,860 from Türkiye, 8,241 from Iran, and 615 from Palestine (Joint Crisis Coordination Centre 2023). The KRI also hosts approximately 700,000 Iraqi IDPs who have fled territories occupied by the Islamic State (ISIS) since 2014. Counted together, refugees and IDPs account for a 12% increase in the KRI's population. Recent statistics (Joint Crisis Coordination Centre 2023) indicate that 1 in 5 people in the KRI was a refugee or IDP, a ratio higher than in Lebanon (1 in 6), Jordan (1 in 11), and Türkiye (1 in 28) (extracted from UNHCR's Global Trends data). Often, the density of displaced people within the host community of KRI is obscured when statistics provided by the United Nations and other humanitarian actors are given for the whole of Iraq (where displaced people represent less than one in every 33 people). Displacement is also highly visible within the landscape of the Kurdistan Region, with a total of 35 official camps for refugees and IDPs and many informal settlements in addition to urban displaced people (UNHCR 2020).

While it has been noted that the authorities in refugee rentier states sometimes "adopt policies that extract revenue from other state or non-state actors in exchange for retaining refugee groups within [their] borders" (Tsourapas 2019), such dynamics still need to be explored for authorities associated with non-state and/or sub-state entities. The question of how this situation plays out in the context of the autonomous KRI, where the vast majority of Iraq's refugees are to be found, leads us to reflect on: i) the relationship between humanitarian operations and the ability of de facto states or state-like governance systems to secure their own funding streams that circumvent the central state, and ii) the utility of humanitarian programming for displaced populations (both refugees and IDPs) within the politics of legitimacy for aspirant states. Indeed, analysis of these dynamics became all the more pressing in the context of, and subsequent backlash to, the 2017 independence referendum called by the leadership of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Adding to the emerging body of work on refugee rentierism, we also consider the parallel case of "IDP rentierism" (a new contribution to the literature) in the context of the mass internal displacement crisis caused by the 2014 ISIS occupation of significant swathes of Iraqi territory.

This paper's core research questions consider how the KRI authorities have instrumentalized the presence of refugees and IDPs, and assistance programs responding to their needs, in the pursuit of both financial independence and political legitimacy. Broadly drawing on reflections about refugee rent-seeking strategies (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024), we seek to map out the systematic steps taken by the KRI authorities to benefit from hosting refugees and IDPs in the Kurdistan Region. With this in mind, we consider: i) how the KRI authorities have sought, and continue to pressure the international community to provide, humanitarian funding to fill their resources gap when hosting large numbers of refugees and IDPs in the post-ISIS context (especially when the KRI struggles to provide employment opportunities for its own, often disgruntled, youth population, many of whom are considering migrating out of Iraq); ii) how, in parallel,

the KRI, like many MENA countries, has used the employment sponsorship (Kafala) system to generate a secondary income from refugees; iii) how the KRI has attempted to use "hospitality" for refugees and IDPs to gain legitimacy for its statehood aspirations, with refugees and their electoral votes being used to obtain greater representation in parliament and a larger budget from Iraq's federal government; and iv) how the dynamics of earmarked funding has also created a hierarchy among refugees, for example by prioritizing Syrian over Iranian and Turkish refugees because of donor attention to their plight, further marginalizing the latter through processes that we elsewhere label as the "othering" of certain refugees (Yassen *et al. forthcoming*).

This paper contains a review of the available data from the KRG, including from the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC), which is the governmental entity responsible for humanitarian affairs and displacement policy under the KRG's Ministry of Interior. We also studied media and financial reports produced by the KRG and donor agencies with a view to understanding the motivations behind programmatic and funding decisions. This methodology is complemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and individuals affected by funding and political contestation. We combined interviews with desk research to improve our understanding of the complex legal framework and procedures in place.

Background: From Oil to Displacement Rentierism

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the adoption of the KRI's Oil and Gas Law in 2007, the Kurdistan Region experienced rapid growth in petro-revenue (Heshmati and Auzer 2018), with the booming economy leading Kurdistan to be dubbed the "new Dubai" (Rubin 2016). However, in 2014 the so-called "oil boom" or "golden days" of Kurdistan's economy ground to a sudden halt with the security threats posed by the advances of, and capture of nearby territory by, the Islamic State terrorist group. ISIS's presence and the deterioration in the security situation caused many oil companies and other international contractors to withdraw from the KRI. Alongside this, the continuation and exacerbation of existing budgetary disputes with the central Iraqi government in Baghdad (Rudaw 2014) has resulted in years of unpaid salaries to civil servants in the KRI (Jalabi and Rasheed 2018), compounding the economic difficulties that Kurdistan has faced since 2014.

Further, this loss of oil revenue and budgetary allocation coincided with the large-scale displacement of Iraqi civilians into territories governed by the KRI, increasing demand on public services. While it had already been hosting a significant population of Syrian refugees since 2011, we argue that this constellation of new factors from 2014 led the KRI to seek compensation for the loss of traditional rentier capital (in the form of oil and gas extraction) by leveraging, and increasingly relying on, refugee and IDP rentierism. Moreover, we consider the particular circumstances when an aspirant state utilizes displaced citizens from elsewhere in the country to which it currently—perhaps reluctantly—belongs for the mobilization of its own resources and political capital to advance arguments for independence. Indeed, the introduction of "IDP rentierism" as a viable form of (much-needed) revenue is observable in the fact that the German government and a number of other EU members made immediate aid increases to the KRI to fund the shelter of hundreds of thousands of IDPs fleeing ISIS in 2014 (Rudaw 2014).

While the KRI has taken great efforts to support these IDPs, we observe the utility of displaced persons in a context of limited other resources. In line with the findings of the literature on refugee rentierism, the authorities have on occasion also exploited the presence of displaced communities for their own ends (Tsourapas 2019; Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021).

Refugee and IDP Rentierism in the KRI: Where Hospitality Meets Utility

UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations have played a critical role in funding the local authorities of the KRI through both refugee and IDP support programs (see, respectively, Abdulrahman

2020; Buijsse 2015). This was especially the case in the period of sudden general decline in Kurdistan's economy following the 2014 emergence of ISIS and the resultant security threats (UNHCR 2020). In this paper, we build on work arguing that the UNHCR functions as a "surrogate state" within large-scale and protracted refugee responses (Slaughter & Crisp 2009; Kagan 2012). In principle, the protection landscape for refugees in the KRI is relatively favorable in comparison to federal Iraq and neighboring states such as Lebanon and Jordan: Syrians in the KRI can obtain a temporary resident's permit, which subsequently provides the right to work, health care, and education (for detailed discussion of KRI's refugee protection landscape: Twigt and Yassen *forthcoming*).

Of course, provision of such services to displaced communities incurs significant additional costs, bringing legitimate cause to seek international funding and support. However, we argue that the KRG has consciously pursued "anti-integration" policies as a means of sustaining the material capital at its disposition through displacement. While it has been argued that the ethno-national solidarity between Kurdish hosts and Kurdish refugees results in a form of "border thinness" (Dionigi 2019), and that the notion of guests is a negotiated concept (Bahram 2018), Syrian (Kurdish) refugees in the KRI have nonetheless found themselves having to navigate the political and financial interests of the local authorities. Indeed, the KRG authorities effectively maintain their refugee funding through infrastructure that excludes Syrian refugees from accessing the welfare system, integrating into the national/local polity, and benefiting from durable solutions. A highly securitized residency regime—operated largely by the Asayish (security service)—and difficult socio-economic realities combine to keep refugees *in situ* and maintain the need for aid from internationally funded humanitarian structures. At the same time, a recently introduced government quota by the KRG on employment limits employers to recruiting 25% of their staff from non-Iraqis (Council of Minister Decision 2022), thus reducing the possibility that refugees can become financially independent as access to employment is restricted in a exclusionary manner (Yassen 2023).

While in many parts of Iraq IDPs were "encouraged" to return to their regions after the defeat of ISIS, the KRI has adopted a more relaxed policy on return and continues to host 700,000 IDPs (Travers and Al-Khatib 2023; Bechocha 2023; Al-Arabiya News 2023). In a recent televised interview, the new Iraqi Minister for Migration and Displacement accused the "KRI authorities of encouraging IDPs to stay in order to continuously secure substantial economic gains and secure votes" (Shafaq News 2023); resources that might be characterized as "IDP rent." In 2022, to boost the economy, the KRG relaxed the legal barriers preventing IDPs from buying property and registering it in their own names; previously, property buyers needed a Kurdish sponsor. The financial benefit of this policy for the KRG has come at the expense of communal tensions with Arab IDPs blamed for skyrocketing house prices in the KRI (IOM 2021).

It could be argued that policies that welcome refugees and IDPs are largely motivated by the financial necessities facing the KRG as it struggles to provide for its own population: salaries for public officials have been withheld by Baghdad and international investment has been cut off since security threats from ISIS. Even the UNHCR representative in Iraq, Jean-Nicolas Beuze, recognized this reality when he noted that: "[when] Syrian refugees can finally go back home to a Syria in peace, the UNHCR's investments, such as these new schools, health centres or investment in the local economy, will remain in Kurdistan and benefit the local communities" (Van Wilgenburg 2023). This is also echoed by the German Minister of Economic Development and Cooperation, who noted: "KRG have convinced us that we should work with the EU to shoulder a broader responsibility in the crisis" (Rudaw 2014). Humanitarian rentierism has thus stepped in to replace, and compensate for, the rentierism of the oil economy that was badly hit by the ISIS crisis.

Secondary Stream of Refugee Rent Generation Through the Employment Sponsorship (Kafala) System

In addition to humanitarian funding provided to Kurdistan (directly or indirectly) by the UN and other international

actors, the KRI also extracts income from Syrian refugees in the form of residency and work permits. Parallel to the international refugee regime, immigration rentier situations emerge in which financial "migration rent" is extracted through governmental control of immigrants' labor, often initially brokered by private actors, notably through the Kafala system of sponsorship. While such a system is widely practiced in the Arab region (ILO 2012), much of the recent literature on the employment sponsorship (Kafala) system in the Middle East has focused on its implications for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (Block *et al*. 2023; Pande 2013) and the Gulf states (Vora 2015). However, Abdul Reda *et al*. note that Iraq's Kafala has brought workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to fill "labor demand in construction, domestic service, hospitality, and healthcare" (2023). Since the arrival of Syrian refugees in the KRI in 2011, local authorities there have realized the potential to expand the work sponsorship system to profiles of people arguably eligible for humanitarian protection—sometimes creating confusing bureaucratic outcomes.[1]

Indeed, for Syrians (and other foreign nationals) to enter the KRI by plane, they must apply for a "foreigner residency permit" before they can be considered to have "legally entered Iraq" (Iraqi Nationality Law 2006). Besides being security cleared and achieving a negative blood test, an employer must be a sponsor and it is compulsory for a private lawyer to be involved, costing about $1,000 (IQD 1.2 million) per annum (Rudaw 2017). Non-renewal of the permit incurs a penalty of about $14 (IQD 20,000) per day (NRC 2022, 8). Some of those holding a foreigner residency card cannot pay the renewal sum, never mind the accumulated penalties, and ultimately submit for refugee protection and registration with the UNHCR (subsequently receiving asylum seeker certificates). Others entering by the land border first register as refugees with UNHCR but then go on to apply for work residency through a local employment sponsor (*kafeel*) once an employment opportunity with an international contractor arises. A 2017 report by Kurdistan's semi-official media agency (Rudaw) cited a Kurd from Syria as saying, "I have been doing business here for nearly five years […] I never faced a problem in these five years regarding the renewal of my residency permit."

Employers pay such fees through the KRI's Residency Department, which operates under the Ministry of Interior. As such, this capital enters the KRG's budget. While few statistics are publicly available on the extent of revenue generated through Syrian residency applications, this process can be considered a secondary stream of income from some Syrian refugees. For example, according to the KRG's own 2017 statistics, a significant proportion of the 285,494 residency applications are assumed to be Syrian (Rudaw 2017). That is, not only is the KRI receiving funding from the UN and international NGOs to meet refugees' humanitarian needs, but it is also charging employment residency fees from some of the same individuals. This overlap between the "foreign residency" and asylum systems has created much bureaucratic confusion between local authorities and the UNHCR,[2] and may also be considered as "double counting" the same Syrians as both needy humanitarian beneficiaries and economically productive employees. Two further points can also be noted here. First, while the KRI is regularly praised for allowing refugees to work, the authorities are also benefiting financially from the refugee labor force. Second, when quoting refugee figures, governmental bodies such as the JCC have considered all Syrians as refugees, but as noted above, those who enter via air are not recognized asylum seekers. One might argue that this is done to inflate the figures to further extract financial gains.

Kurdistan's Attempts to Gain Political Legitimacy Through Refugee and IDP Rentierism

Besides the financial or material benefits that the KRI has seen from hosting refugees and IDPs (as outlined above), we now consider the political capital generated through humanitarian hosting and how it has served the KRI as an aspirant state. Such dynamics became clearly visible in the context of the 2017 referendum for an independent Kurdish state. Parts of the campaign in favor of Kurdish

independence (the "Yes" vote) focused on showing how the KRI was already functioning as a sovereign state in its refugee and IDP response, because this allowed the KRI to position itself and perform as a sovereign state. Additionally, building on a long history of the Kurdish diasporas around the world lobbying to raise the profile of Kurdish interests and the need to address historic injustices against Kurds (Khoshnaw 2023; Kaya 2020; Toivanen and Baser 2019), Syrian Kurdish refugees in the KRI have more recently mobilized as advocates within KRI's independence campaign, and for the wider Kurdish right to self-determination.

Beyond the rhetorical advantage of KRI's track record in hosting refugees as being a strong argument for statehood, several key interviewees from Syria confirmed that during the 2017 referendum, in which a majority of 92.73% ultimately voted in favor of independence (Chulov 2017), refugees were issued with ID cards by the KRG so that they might vote for an independent Kurdish state. This was also the case in other elections, when refugees were given a special voting pass so the KRI could obtain greater representation in parliament and a larger portion of the budget. One of our Syrian interlocutors noted that, "during the elections, we get a lot of attention and good service for the camps by the two ruling political parties of the KRI [so that we might] vote for them and fund their political projects." A similar argument existed around the contested right of IDPs from outside Kurdistan, or the "disputed territories" between Erbil and Baghdad, to vote for a secession that would arguably render them "refugees" overnight. As such, the KRI has provided humanitarian beneficiaries with political concessions (issuing voter passes during elections) in return for their continued security and services to meet their daily needs.

The "Othering" of Non-Lucrative Displaced Peoples

The monetizing of displaced people through refugee and IDP rentierism initiatives has had the adverse consequence of producing a hierarchy among different displaced groups in the KRI. In contrast to the principles of international law, this grants preferential protection to some forcibly displaced communities, such as Syrians, at the expense of "others", such as Iranians and Turks. The international response to Syrian refugees has been prioritized through the Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) (UNDP and UNHCR 2015), which was established as a "strategic, coordination, planning, advocacy, fundraising, and programming platform for humanitarian and development partners to respond to the Syria crisis" (UNHCR 2019). At the same time, only very limited—sometimes tokenistic—funding is delivered to the so-called "old caseload" communities of Iranian and Turkish refugees in the KRI. Indeed, only limited funding goes to other profiles of refugees who are not Syrian. The lack of funding from the international community has meant that the KRI authorities do not see these groups as potential contributors to the KRI economy and therefore they are treated differently, namely with generally stricter measures and much more scrutiny (Yassen *et al. forthcoming*).

The KRI authorities' actions are also comparable to other processes elsewhere in the region, for example the treatment of Syrian refugees in Türkiye is much more favorable to those of Afghan refugees because of the aid and assistance programs they attract from donors (Almasri 2023 2024). Likewise, the Jordanian treatment of Syrians compared to other migrant and refugee communities is similar (Parker-Magyar 2019, also 2024). As described by Arar (2023), "In the wake of Syrian reception, Iraqi refugees were quickly deprioritized. International aid given to the UNHCR was largely earmarked for Syrian refugees, with a small percentage reserved for Iraqis." Such processes are ultimately producing new ways of othering certain refugees.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the application of refugee rentierism and introduced the parallel concept of "IDP rentierism" (taking account of similar dynamics resulting from internal displacement) to the KRI context. The KRI authorities have adopted a number of measures to generate income from the presence of refugees and IDPs in the KRI, and the use of the Kafala system is a clear example of this.

Contrary to the international refugee law regime, the KRI authorities treat Syrians entering their territory via air as foreigners rather than refugees, which subjects the latter to penalties for unpaid residency cards and restrictions on sponsorship. This system of generating income in return for continually providing security to these groups of refugees and IDPs has excluded other refugees who often struggle to garner donor attention.

Moreover, we argue that the KRI has attempted to gain financial benefit as well as legitimacy and mobilization for statehood by capitalizing on the presence of refugees and IDPs—notably during the 2017 campaign for Kurdish independence where the KRI sought to frame its hospitality to displaced peoples as evidence that it was already performing like a state. Although such efforts ultimately failed, the KRI continues to pursue financial and diplomatic independence. There is overwhelming evidence that the KRI has sought external economic capital from refugees and IDPs (through international donors and governments) as well as political benefits by using refugees during elections to obtain greater representation and a larger portion of budget). In this sense, one can see how each case of refugee and IDP rentierism has become a significant alternative, or back-up, to oil rentierism.

Certainly, refugee and IDP rent has presented the KRI with a convenient (perhaps partial) substitution for lost oil revenue in the aftermath of the ISIS crisis. More recently, as the oil economy has picked up (Chalak 2022)—albeit tensions between KRI and Baghdad ongoing (Iraq Oil Report 2022)—the KRI now combines traditional rentierism with refugee and IDP rentierism in a more diversified portfolio. This requires a careful balancing act for the Kurdistan Region: on the one hand, stressing that it, and the rest of Iraq, is stable enough to support the return of international investment in the fuel sector, while, on the other hand, highlighting that the IDPs' places of origin are still too insecure for their return, necessitating continued funding for the KRI's humanitarian sector.

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Endnotes

[1] Interview with international humanitarian organization lawyer, June 3 2023.
[2] Interview with local legal specialist, July 14 2023.

A Tale of Two Municipalities:
The Local Politics of International Assistance During Refugee Crises

Reva Dhingra, Independent Scholar

Introduction

Refugee "crises," or the sudden, transnational flight of thousands or even millions of individuals, have driven the bulk of the global increase in refugees over the past ten years. Over 70 percent of refugees are located in developing countries. In states often already facing challenges in economic growth, weak public infrastructure, and political fragility, refugee crises present a potential shock to domestic political, economic, and social systems. Refugee presences are also a distinctly spatial phenomenon. While some areas of a country may receive few or no refugees during a crisis, the population of other areas may double or even triple (Jacobsen 2002). A refugee crisis not only changes demographic balances but can also strain local government budgets and public services. However, a refugee crisis simultaneously offers new sources of economic opportunity through international assistance, refugee economic participation, and new transnational linkages.

Over the past decade, a new body of literature has examined the phenomenon of refugee rentier states, where national governments leverage the presence of refugees to attract external political, economic, and social resources (Kelberer 2017; Tsourapas 2019). Yet limited work has examined how refugee-hosting localities may seek to attract such resources. "Unpacking" the rentier state to consider subnational actors is critical to understanding the domestic political and economic effects of rents, and whether the external resources stemming from refugees reach the local level (Hertog 2023; Lynch and Tsourapas 2024).

In this contribution, I examine how local elected officials in clientelist, developing systems perceive and attempt to influence the allocation of international assistance and central state support during refugee crises. I argue that humanitarian assistance during refugee crises is distinct from development assistance, which the central state may often successfully co-opt or redirect spatially within the country (Briggs 2014; Jablonski 2014). While central state attempts to co-opt aid typically persist during refugee crises, refugee presences are often physically observable by international organizations and create real or perceived pressure on local services and employment. Consequently, I argue the central state is forced to initially allow assistance to go toward refugee-hosting municipalities.

Local elected officials are not passive in this process, however. Based on over 80 interviews conducted from 2018 to 2021 in 14 different municipalities in Jordan and in-depth case studies of two municipalities, I argue that Jordanian mayors in Syrian refugee-hosting areas have sought to capitalize on refugee presences. Refugees are used to obtain fiscal assistance from international sources and, in some cases, achieve policy or clientelist objectives previously out of reach in the country's highly centralized system. Even mayors of municipalities that have few refugees according to official data attempt to utilize refugees for additional international and central state budgetary support. Local elected officials' perception of refugees as resources leads to these officials attempting to obtain assistance from central and international sources by alternately characterizing refugees as resources or burdens who may cause social unrest if refugee-hosting municipalities are not supported.

This research builds on the refugee rentier literature (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024) as well as the growing body of work examining how local actors are increasingly engaging in policymaking during refugee crises and accessing transnational networks (Betts, Memişoğlu, and Ali 2021; Mourad 2017).

Existing Literature

In the 21st century, most refugee crises in developing states come with the involvement of a multitude of international actors and assistance efforts. To assist refugees, mitigate the effects of refugee crises on ally host countries, and prevent onward displacement, bilateral and multilateral donors may offer direct fiscal assistance and programmatic support through international organizations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). A state's ability to access aid is dependent on ties with donor countries and the threat of out-migration of refugees to donor countries, among many other factors (Tsourapas 2019). Due to factors including limited host state capacity, perceptions of corruption, and donors' strategic and political objectives, donors have also increasingly channeled assistance for refugees through non-state actors like INGOs and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs; Bennett 2014).

Some states limit international involvement in supporting refugees due to political reasons or fears of interference (Jacobsen 1996). Recent work, however, has examined how states may actively utilize the presence of refugees to obtain economic concessions and aid from developed countries, which are wary of refugees migrating to their own countries (Tsourapas 2019; Kelberer 2017; Arar 2017). Tsourapas (2019) explores the phenomenon of "refugee rentierism" in describing the behavior of three key refugee hosts—Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye—toward bilateral and multilateral donors. He outlines two key strategies, blackmailing and back-scratching, to describe the bargaining relationship between these countries and the European Union. However, much of the research focusing on the utility of refugees to extract external rents theorizes primarily on a national and international level rather than as part of a state's domestic politics.

How international assistance reaches the local level is critical to understanding whether governments use refugees as a source of unearned rents to sustain their political coalitions of support or to fulfill the needs of communities often already struggling prior to refugees' arrival. Recent work assesses how domestic political systems may shape the local allocation of international assistance for political purposes. Briggs (2014) and Jablonski (2014) find that patronage politics between the regime and supporters in Kenya led to a direction of development aid toward areas of government support. This research has a key implication: a local government's ability to benefit from assistance or work with international actors may be contingent on the central government's willingness to allow such contact with a specific locality.

Yet, while most aid diversion research focuses on development aid, humanitarian responses to refugee presences, conflicts, and natural disasters are far from immune to these challenges. Humanitarian actors are often implicated in both domestic and international politics, serving as witting or unwitting accomplices in a foreign or host state's political agenda (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Barnett 2011; Donini et al. 2012). For example, in a study of United States natural disaster assistance, Bommer, Dreher, and Perez-Alvarez (2022) demonstrate that larger amounts of aid are disbursed when natural disasters hit the home region of a recipient country's leader. However, existing research has not substantively explored the dynamics of international assistance during refugee crises.

Theory

I provide a framework for understanding the allocation of international assistance at the local level and how local elected officials perceive refugee presences and such allocation, as evidenced in attempts to influence this process. I first examine how the early dynamics of refugee crises shape aid allocation largely toward localities with higher numbers and proportions of refugees. Second, I argue that Jordanian local officials in refugee-dense (which I define for this study as municipalities whose population is greater than 5% Syrian refugees) and refugee-scarce localities (those where it is not) view refugees as resources to obtain international and central state assistance.

Most refugees globally live in urban or peri-urban areas as opposed to camps, which are typically directly managed

by governments in conjunction with international actors. Uncertainty about refugee whereabouts in non-camp settings may pose a significant initial barrier to reaching refugees. Furthermore, given the often clientelist approaches of governments toward international assistance discussed above (Briggs 2014; Jablonski 2014; Clark 2018), international assistance during refugee crises may well be subject to similar attempts at redirection.

I argue that two factors will result in aid largely reaching localities with higher densities of refugees. First, refugees are mostly physically observable—whether by the local community, government, or international actors—when they arrive in an area. Often, refugees must register with host governments or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to access aid and services. However, some countries, such as Lebanon and Pakistan, either prevent registration or actively persecute and deport refugees, resulting in an increased degree of uncertainty.

Second, refugees may cause real or perceived local pressure on housing, employment, public services, and prices. Strong evidence shows that, regardless of actual impact, refugees have a negative effect on attitudes among host country citizens whether because of resource competition or negative attitudes toward out-groups (Hardin 1995; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Dancygier 2010; Adida 2011). This literature suggests that anti-refugee sentiment may manifest through violence against refugees, xenophobia, or protests against refugees and the state. Alrababa'h et al. (2019) find in Jordan that citizens largely express positive attitudes toward Syrian refugees themselves, but they hold overwhelmingly negative perceptions of refugees' impact on housing, the economy, and services.

I argue that the state and international actors are both aware of the possibility of social unrest. This threat shapes their subnational allocation decisions. While central states' attempts to extract rents persist during refugee crises, such as through fees or seeking employment for relatives, this factor prevents significant spatial redirection. Therefore, while variation may occur in the level of assistance within refugee-dense areas, refugee-dense areas in the country overall receive higher levels of international assistance relative to non-refugee-dense areas.

Allocating most aid to refugee-hosting localities has significant implications for local politics and service provision. Refugees are often located in border areas in camps and peri-urban areas or, as states increasingly move away from using encampments, in urban areas. Border areas, in particular, often have limited influence in the national political arena and low levels of public service provision (Jacobsen 2002). A growing strand of research has centered on local elected officials as actors in the international–domestic nexus formed and developed during refugee crises (Betts, Memişoğlu, and Ali 2021; Mourad 2017).

Understanding the potential benefits and detriments of refugee presences and accompanying international aid is crucial to understanding local officials' possible rent-seeking behavior. Recent research has found varied effects. Some work finds no effects on host citizen labor or access to services (Hartnett 2018; Tatah et al. 2016), while other work finds negative effects on commodity prices and low-income and informal worker employment (Alix-Garcia et al. 2018; Ceritoglu et al. 2017). In contrast, Zhou, Grossman, and Ge (2022) find that local, camp-adjacent communities with greater levels of refugee presence experienced substantial improvements in local development.

Regardless of the economic or social impacts for local populations, refugees can serve as sources of rents for local elected officials. I assume that officials are office-seeking and rent-seeking for themselves, family members, and political coalition members. I also assume that officials are elected based on clientelistic relationships with constituents, programmatic measures, or a combination of the two. International assistance, through NGO-implemented programs and direct support to local government, represents a potential additional source of revenue for office-seeking politicians. This may be weighed against other factors, including the local impacts

of refugees, political risks, and anti-out-group sentiment. In Lebanon, for example, Syrian refugees have faced mass evictions in some municipalities (Mourad 2017; Frelick 2018).

However, I argue that local elected officials view international assistance as potentially outweighing the costs of refugees. In refugee-dense areas, officials attempt to actively leverage refugee presences through their interactions with international actors—in some cases bypassing the central state—by casting refugees alternately as resources or burdens. In less refugee-dense areas, officials observe increased international assistance provision in refugee-dense areas and seek to attract resources by arguing that refugees have impacted their municipalities.

This perception of refugees as resources for international aid challenges understandings of refugees solely as burdens, in line with analysis by Jacobsen (2002) of how refugees can benefit states and localities. Instead, my argument builds on theories posed by Tsourapas (2019) at the national level and Betts, Memişoğlu, and Ali (2021) and Lama Mourad at the local level to examine the strategies adopted by officials in pursuit of the material and political benefits posed by refugee presences.

Case Study: Methods and Background

I examine the Syrian refugee response in Jordan, focusing on the period from 2012 to 2019. I undertake process-tracing of aid allocation at the national level and comparative case studies at the municipal level, based on interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 and on primary sources. I conducted interviews with NGO employees, central administrative authorities in the Ministries of Local Administration and Planning and International Cooperation, and with bilateral and multilateral donors. I interviewed 14 mayors in refugee-dense areas—which I define as municipalities whose population is greater than 5% Syrian refugees, such as Umm el-Jimal and Mafraq City—and less refugee-dense municipalities, such as Dhiban and Ain Al-Basha. I also interviewed bureaucrats in some of these municipalities.

Jordan's 12 governorates are divided into two separate elected administrative systems: districts, governed by parliament members, and municipalities, governed by mayors and municipal councils. Mayors are responsible for a highly limited range of services and central government bureaucracy restricts decision-making (Clark 2018; Gao 2016). Both the municipal and parliamentary district structures have been described as engines of patronage and central co-optation by scholars of Jordan (Clark 2018; Kao 2015; Lust-Okar 2006).

International assistance, primarily direct fiscal support, has formed a crucial component of the Jordanian monarchy's distributive relationship with its population since independence, with scholars dubbing Jordan a "semi-rentier" economy (Peters and Moore 2009). Scholars have further argued that Jordan has historically leveraged its geopolitical position to earn billions of dollars in both inter-Arab aid and other foreign aid, including through altering its foreign policy (Ryan 2018; Brand 1995). Jordan has also hosted successive refugee populations—including over 2.2 million Palestinian refugees—since its independence in 1946. Palestinian and Iraqi refugees constituted a key source of humanitarian, development, and security aid for the Jordanian state and have themselves contributed substantively to Jordan's economic, social, and political development. The historical legacies of displacement present a potential confounder—local strategies towards refugees and accompanying international aid may be shaped by previous experiences.

The 2011 Syrian revolution and subsequent civil war sent Syrians fleeing to neighboring countries. As many as 3,000 refugees crossed Jordan's northern border every day in late 2012 and 2013. As of January 2024, more than 643,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan are registered with the United Nations. Since 2012, Jordan has received billions of dollars in international humanitarian and development aid targeting its citizens and Syrian refugees. While most assistance has focused on health, education, shelter, and livelihoods, as of 2019, at least $100 million from donors

including the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development, and the International Labour Organization has gone specifically toward supporting Jordanian municipalities. This assistance has provided funding for services such as trash collection, municipal employment initiatives, and capacity-building training for municipal staff.

Empirical Evidence

The Subnational Allocation of International Assistance

Umm el-Jimal municipality is in the northeastern region of Mafraq governorate, bordering Syria. Despite a strong tribal, East Bank Jordanian presence (the primary coalition members of the monarchy), the governorate has a relatively low percentage of public sector employment compared with other predominantly tribal East Bank Jordanian governorates. It is also characterized by high illiteracy rates, low access to education, and high levels of poverty (Ababsa ed., 2013). In 2012, thousands of Syrian refugees began to arrive, fleeing the civil war raging just miles away from Umm el-Jimal. The 2015 census placed Syrians at nearly 20% of the municipality's population—excluding the 78,000 refugees residing in the Zaatari refugee camp, which extends into the municipality's borders. Yet, when discussing Syrian refugees during my visit to the mayor's office in 2018, the mayor was sanguine. He pointed out a trophy he received from an international organization for "best mayor of the year" for his management of the Syrian crisis.[1]

Many refugees arriving in northern Jordan during the Syrian civil war originated from southern Syria. Indeed, observers have highlighted the strong kinship ties between northern Jordanians and southern Syrians (Alrababa'h et al. 2019). However, NGOs and media sources highlighted protests early on by northern Jordanians against perceived favoritism toward refugees by the government and international organizations. Protesters blocked roads and prevented water trucks from entering the Zaatari camp (Luck 2013). Residents I interviewed expressed resentment toward not only Syrian refugees but the central government and NGO employees working in Umm el-Jimal employed from outside of the municipality.[2]

However, Umm el-Jimal has also benefited from a surge in international funding. Accusations of corruption and redirection of aid dogged previous refugee response efforts, such as for Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan (Plascov 1981; Seeley 2010). However, my interviews with NGO employees serving as government liaisons, central administrative authorities, donors, and mayors, along with a quantitative dataset presented in a separate paper, do not suggest massive spatial redirection of assistance for Syrian refugees.

Instead, the evidence points to a response characterized by significant central bureaucratic bloat while still enabling assistance to reach refugee-dense municipalities at higher levels than less refugee-dense municipalities. Rather than seeking to geographically redirect aid, central authorities were most often interested in ensuring permit processes were followed or providing technical feedback on the programs. There were also cases of attempting to hire relatives or connections or pushing for local employment rather than foreigners.[3] Interviewees working in government relations for INGOs told me that the primary challenges they faced in obtaining permissions for programs stemmed from sector ministries—such as health and education and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation—disagreeing on objectives. They noted that government employees sometimes attempted to include budget lines to subsidize salaries for their ministries in programs. No interviewee indicated systematic central government efforts to influence where programs took place, though two interviewees noted that some ministries attempted to influence the local hiring process for project implementation.[4]

As a result, municipalities such as Umm el-Jimal have received significant international support relative to municipalities with fewer refugees. Support takes the form of humanitarian programs and public and non-state service provision, and reaches both Jordanians and Syrians. Interviews with Ministry of Local Administration

employees, NGO employees, and donor representatives further confirmed that while favoritism toward refugee-dense areas with strong ties to the central government was high, refugee-dense areas received more support overall compared with less refugee-dense areas.

A Tale of Two Municipalities

Umm el-Jimal is not the only municipality that has seen a surge of refugee-related international assistance. Across northern and parts of central Jordan, municipalities found themselves at the center of international attention during the early years of the Syrian refugee crisis. They have struggled to manage the additional service challenges and pressures on employment produced by the population doubling over only a few months.

Jordan's highly centralized system precludes effective engagement of local officials in determining international program priorities. Permit processes are centrally controlled: without any input into the assistance arriving in their localities, there seems to be little reason for local officials to view refugee-related assistance as a resource. However, the case of Umm el-Jimal illustrates that local officials have increasingly pushed for local (elite) input into decision-making—despite central government control over coordination, fund disbursement, and permit processes. In an interview, the mayor highlighted his role in successfully pressuring the central government and international organizations to increase service provision: "I said to them, come and see the level of problems here […] If you have a powerful mayor, you can bring the central government to you," he noted.[4]

It remains unclear whether local officials' strategies to leverage refugees actually translate into better service provision for constituents. In a group interview, Umm el-Jimal residents said that any benefits they received were "simple" compared with benefits received by Syrian refugees living in the neighboring Zaatari refugee camp. As one resident put it: "I'm not saying to you that there haven't been benefits, there have been benefits [...] but [usage by Syrians] has eroded infrastructure."[5]

However, the case of Umm el-Jimal and other refugee-dense municipalities I visited indicate that local elected officials perceive refugees as linked with politically useful international assistance. The mayor touted his own increasing power and responsibility, noting that his "charisma" and "ability to bring services" following the refugees' arrival were key factors in his reelection in 2017.[6]

At the same time, the direction of aid toward refugee-dense municipalities has bred resentment among mayors in municipalities with fewer refugees. The municipalities of Dhiban and Lib and Mleih (Lib and Mleih is a single municipality) are developing localities with high unemployment and weak service provision. Their challenges far pre-date the Syrian refugee crisis and the perception of refugees as resources. In seeking support, mayors of these municipalities have, at times, sought to establish direct connections with international organizations and donors. They have also lobbied central government officials by highlighting the Syrian refugees within their communities and the burdens posed by them.

A predominantly East Bank tribal area, Dhiban faces among the highest rates of unemployment in Jordan. When I visited the municipalities in 2019, the mayors spoke of being overlooked by the central government and international actors, both in terms of employment and in comparison with northern municipalities, which host the majority of refugees. In particular, the mayors of both Dhiban and Lib and Mleih argued that the central government and international organizations were drastically undercounting refugees in their municipalities (which the census places at less than 3% of the municipalities' populations). The mayor of Dhiban said:

> "We have a problem with Dhiban that many [Syrians] live in Dhiban, but they are registered in Mafraq or the municipalities of the north, because there is a salary for them there, the [refugees] receive international support. But in Dhiban we don't get support from international organizations."[7]

While it is likely that the number of refugees living in Dhiban differs from the official number, central government officials and international actors disputed the mayor's argument that the number was dramatically higher.

The rhetoric employed by local officials explicitly links Syrian refugees to the need for infrastructure support from international organizations. Aware of international organizations' focus on areas hosting Syrian refugees, mayors in less refugee-dense areas highlighted the negative impacts of refugees on their communities. Indeed, the mayor of Lib and Mleih noted that the number of refugees in his town was "twice" the number in Madaba (a much larger neighboring municipality) and his "municipality hadn't gotten anything but [Madaba] got millions of dinar in support." He felt that his municipality, meanwhile, was "helping Syrians for free."[8]

Central government employees further corroborated the perception that refugees are a crucial, and potentially the only, way to effectively obtain international assistance. In an interview, one central government employee noted:

> "Most of these [refugee-receiving municipalities] achieved higher levels of service delivery than they actually had before the crisis. The capacity development of the staff, institution-wise, administrative-wise, financial-wise have all been positive. The negative is that this has caused some imbalance in development compared to other municipalities. Syrian refugees are located in the northern part and rarely in the southern part. Some southern municipalities are excluded that are in urgent need."

More than 10 years after the arrival of Syrian refugees, the central state has made explicit efforts to redirect assistance back toward municipalities based on developmental outcomes rather than refugee presence.

Discussion

This article provides a theoretical roadmap for understanding patterns of subnational aid allocation during fast-onset refugee crises and how local elected officials perceive refugee presences and the accompanying aid allocation. I establish an empirical pattern of local elected officials perceiving and utilizing refugees as resources to obtain international assistance for policy or clientelist purposes. Elected officials in less refugee-dense municipalities seek to highlight the number of refugees in their municipalities, aware of the link between refugee presence and international attention. In refugee-dense municipalities with high official numbers of refugees, elected officials also emphasize the burdens of hosting, yet many highlight their relationships with international organizations as enabling them to overcome these burdens and achieve policy objectives.

Understanding the distribution of international assistance to primarily refugee-dense areas—and the local elected officials' perception of refugees as a means to obtain international aid—is only a starting point. Once aid arrives in a locality, the policies adopted by local elected officials have significant implications for service provision for their constituents. However, these are outside the scope of this project. A crucial area for additional research is to examine how policymaking around these new resources can shape constituents' lives and whether refugee rentierism benefits accrue primarily to political leaders or whether they also reach the communities welcoming refugees.

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Endnotes

[1] Interview with Umm el-Jimal mayor, August 2018.
[2] Interview with Umm el-Jimal community group, August 2018.
[3] Interview with INGO coordination employee, June 2018.
[4] Interview with Umm el-Jimal mayor, August 2018.
[5] Interview with Umm el-Jimal community group, August 2018.
[6] Interview with Umm el-Jimal mayor, August 2021.
[7] Interview with mayor of Dhiban, August 2019.
[8] Interview with mayor of Lib and Mleih, August 2019.

Outsourcing Domestic Migration Management in the Gulf:
Public–Private Partnership Models as Immigration Rentier Quasi-State Actors in the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have traditionally monopolized control over their domestic migration management processes (i.e., visas, contractual documentation processes, conflict resolutions, etc.) concerning migrant populations via Kafala sponsorship systems (see Babar, this volume). Less publicly, GCC states have consolidated their control and shifted their domestic migration management over the past decade by introducing public–private partnership (PPP) models to effectively control their migrant populations (see Thiollet 2016; Thiollet 2023). By strategically integrating a diverse array of private sector actors into the state's domestic apparatus, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has established de facto *immigration rentier quasi-states*. I define immigration rentier quasi-states as not fully institutionalized or autonomous state entities that work closely with private sector entities. Their primary intent is to manage migration flows while extracting "migration rent" (i.e., via direct and indirect taxation, documentation processing, renewal fees, etc.) from migrant populations in the GCC. Thus, immigration rentier quasi-state actors have become increasingly incorporated into the domestic state apparatus of the Emirati state's management of migrant populations (cf. Bish 2024).

This paper examines the roles of immigration rentier quasi-states in international migration politics, focusing on the case of the UAE. Building on the emerging scholarly work on migration and refugee rentierism (see Thiollet and Tsourapas 2024; Tsourapas 2021; Thiollet 2023; Lynch and Tsourapas 2024), I explore the rise of immigration rentier quasi-states and their complex institutional origins, structures, and operations within the UAE's broader domestic migration management strategies. Using the Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actors as a case study, I offer two arguments: firstly, that the UAE's rentier strategy using immigration rentier quasi-state actors has become a strategy for outsourcing migration management, central to its long-term domestic and foreign policy aims. Secondly, the Emirati state's rentier strategy demonstrates not only their extractive domestic migration management model but also mirrors their diffusing capacity to rule. These arguments contribute to the emerging discourses on migration and refugee rentierism politics by highlighting the immigration rentier quasi-state actors' emergence, diversity, and functionalities in the Global South.

Methodologically, I employ a case study approach using selected UAE immigration rentier quasi-state actors, including *Tadbeer* (for domestic work processing), *Tasheel* (for labor and employment processing), and *Amer* (for immigration-related processing). These are of particular significance because they serve as the central rent-seeking actors involved in the overall domestic migration management processes via the PPP approach. While the UAE has introduced various immigration rentier quasi-state actors (e.g., Tawafuqh, Tawjeeh, etc.), these domestic PPP services do not constitute mandatory requirements for most of the migrant populations.[1] I also employed process tracing and secondary analysis of government data publications on the role of domestic PPP arrangements in the UAE.

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, I highlight the existing literature on the politics of migration and rentierism, underscoring the little-studied element of immigration rentier quasi-state actors' influence in the GCC's domestic migration management. Secondly, I contextualize the roles and emergence of immigration rentier quasi-state actors in the GCC, particularly in the

UAE, and describe their domestic rent-seeking structures, operations, and processes for migrant populations. I specifically examine three examples of immigration rentier quasi-state actors and their institutional processes that deal with domestic migration management: *Tadbeer* (for domestic work processing), *Tasheel* (for labor and employment processing), and *Amer* (for immigration processing). I investigate the intricate logic of immigration rentier quasi-state actors and their rent-seeking strategies and behaviors in the UAE. The concluding section summarizes the future role of immigration rentier quasi-state actors in the emerging literature on the politics of domestic migration and rentierism in the GCC and, more broadly, the Global South.

The Politics of Labor Migration and Refugee Rentierism in the Middle East

International migration politics scholars are increasingly theorizing about the under-examined role of host states' rent-seeking behaviors in the Middle East (see Tsourapas 2019; Thiollet 2016; Thiollet & Tsourapas 2024). While rentierism has been extensively examined in the international politics of the Middle East (see Herb 2014; Hertog 2011; Beblawi, 1976), it is only more recently that some scholars have attempted to provide a more robust conceptualization within the field of migration studies. Tsourapas (2019) investigates how host states (such as Jordan) extract "rents" by utilizing refugees as political leverage to gain economic payoffs. Thiollet (2016) examines how GCC nationals can extract "migration rent" from their citizenship by selling their sponsorship visas without providing official employment to migrants, thus making it a "secondary rent" for migrants (also see Eddin, 1982; Thiollet 2021). However, scholars in this area have yet to systematically investigate the diverse range of complex state and non-state actors, specifically immigration rentier quasi-state actors via PPPs, within the domestic migration management context in the Middle East. This can help to clarify host states' various rent-seeking institutional modalities to strategically extract rents from large-scale migrant populations (current and prospective) in both the host and source countries in the Global South.

Post-COVID-19, migration has flowed continuously in the GCC. This means that there is a critical need to further investigate the various host and non-state immigration rentier actors and their rent-seeking strategies and processes. Previous scholarship on migration politics has extensively examined how host states in the GCC influence domestic migration management in the context of internal mobility (Babar 2014; Hertog 2011 2023), regional migration governance (Jureidni 2019; Thiollet 2016), migrant exploitation via the Kafala sponsorship system (Longva 1999; Halabi 2008; Keane & McGeehan 2008; Fernandez 2020), sectoral precariousness (Parennas 2016; 2021), citizenship (Lori 2021), and migration diplomacy and power politics (Malit & Tsourapas 2021; Thiollet 2011; 2021). To build upon this literature, it is key to focus on the rent-seeking behavior of host states and diverse non-state, private actors operating within the GCC domestic migration management space.

This paper builds on Thiollet (2023), Thiollet and Tsourapas (2024), and Lynch and Tsourapas's (2024) conceptualization of migration rentier states. It situates the emerging role of immigration rentier quasi-state actors in the GCC, specifically in the UAE. While rent-seeking literature on migration has tended to focus on host states (Tsourapas 2019; Thiollet 2021 2023), it is essential to examine how host states strategically exploit and co-opt with private sector actors to extract not only rent but also administrative, technological, and other institutional resources. Host states use these resources to execute the everyday migration processes required to legalize and govern their migrant populations. These GCC states' immigration rentier quasi-state actors employ more "corporatized" PPP arrangements by outsourcing specific state processes of domestic migration management (Babar 2014; Sabban 2020). Thus, as the global governance of temporary migration has shifted toward PPP, it has also become an essential instrument for the GCC's rentier states.

Little is empirically known about the historical emergence of immigration rentier quasi-state actors via PPP and how

they contribute to the overarching architecture of domestic migration management (Thiollet 2016) and migration diplomacy (Malit & Tsourapas 2021) in host states. Thiollet (2016) highlights the use of "public-private multilateralism" (i.e., bilateral agreements, dialogues) strategies using a diverse range of state and non-state actors, particularly the "transnational migration management" aspects of migration flows operating both in the Asia–GCC host corridors. Malit and Tsourapas (2021) emphasize the role of non-state actors in influencing host states' bilateral and multilateral migration diplomacy processes. However, while they partially explore the complex role of non-state actors in shaping domestic migration management and diplomacy, they have yet to examine the logic and process of their institutional emergence within the politics of GCC domestic migration management literature. To address some of these gaps, I examine the case of Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actors in the UAE. I look at how the UAE deploys multiple quasi-state actors to extract migration rent and manage migrant populations (using technology, migration management systems, etc.) to optimize its control over domestic and global migration flows into the territory.

The Politics of Domestic Migration Management in the GCC

For many decades, the UAE monopolized control over the domestic migration management processes (i.e., the issuance and processing of labor and employment, immigration documentation, etc.) that contribute to generating state revenues. The rise of immigration rentier quasi-state actors has mainly occurred within the past decade due to several factors. Firstly, with consistent international solid criticisms and legal cases (i.e., the International Labour Organization's forced labor case in 2014) challenging the UAE and other GCC states' perceived "weak" migration institutional capacities (see Malit and Tsourapas 2021; Thiollet 2016), the UAE developed an increasingly corporatized PPP approach, legally co-opting private sector actors (via joint ownership, licensing, accreditation, etc.) to govern domestic migration management processes. These immigration rentier quasi-state actors became the "smart" solutions of the Emirati state to the domestic migration management dilemmas of the rising influx of migrant populations, as well as a strategic response to the growing localization demands (i.e., the inclusion of mandatory employment for Emirati nationals within PPPs) (WAM 2024). They have also become a strategic response to the institutional bureaucratic efficiency issues (i.e., costs, manpower capacity, and other resource constraints) of the UAE's administration, given its limited pool of existing local talent.

Secondly, in line with the UAE's vision of localization and competitive knowledge economies, establishing immigration rentier quasi-state actors has allowed it to outsource localization to the private sector institutions by hiring an Emirati workforce. This outsourcing, rent-seeking strategy has also given it the upper hand to fully control private sector operations via licensing and sub-licensing within the federal ministry (i.e., the UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE)) while simultaneously extracting rents from them (i.e., taxes, fees, fines, renewals, etc.).

Thirdly, the UAE's establishment of immigration rentier quasi-state actors has allowed it to effectively exploit private sector institutions' existing digital technological capacity and know-how. This further enables the state to modernize rent-seeking systems toward the migration population within domestic state institutions while placing significant monitoring and control over the institutionalized corporate transactions of private sector actors. This outsourcing of rent-seeking control has further allowed the UAE to extract institutional rents and more. The deinstitutionalization of Emirati state services via immigration rentier quasi-state actors allows the state to rule through deinstitutionalized or diffusion strategies despite socio-institutional constraints (i.e., demographic imbalance, institutional bureaucratic limitations, etc.).

The following section highlights the domestic (Tadbeer, Tasheel, and Amer) Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actors operating to extract rents from current and prospective migrants.

Selected Immigration Rentier Quasi-State Actors in the UAE

At the domestic level, Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actors extract migration rents from some 11 million transit migrant populations. The complex legal documentation processing (i.e., labor and employment, immigration, etc.) of domestic migration management has created a strategic revenue source for the UAE. It has also created an opportunity for the state to effectively observe private sector entities by cooperating with and monitoring their domestic migration management practices. While these processes were historically under the control of their respective federal ministries (i.e., the UAE Ministries of Labour and Interior), the Emirati state has transferred these institutional controls to quasi-immigration rentier state actors, which has resulted in their "corporatization" at the frontline level (Sabban 2020).

Tadbeer

Tadbeer is an Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actor that concentrates on the comprehensive recruitment, training, and placement of 19 distinct categories of state-defined migrant domestic workers, who numbered at least one million in 2023 (excluding those who were undocumented) (see GLMM 2023). The UAE's MOHRE (formerly the Ministry of Labour) has strategically shifted from a laissez-faire approach to a corporatized, immigration rentier quasi-state model (Malit & Naufal 2016; Sabban 2020). In fact, the new Tadbeer model governs more than 120 licensed branches. The UAE mainly reserves institutional franchise ownership for local wealthy Emiratis and their private sector partners, with more than 500,000 UAE dirhams (AED) as a bank guarantee to the MOHRE for the entire duration of the Tadbeer license.[2] The Emirati state holds substantial control over the licensed or accredited franchise of Tadbeer domestic work agencies by controlling, monitoring, and governing the private sector actors' daily transactions while simultaneously imposing taxes and fees (i.e., violators of up to AED 50,000 fines) on their everyday transactions. These taxes and fees significantly contribute to the federal ministry's annual state revenue. In other words, the newly structured Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state Tadbeer shifts absolute institutional power to the state and extracts financial and institutional rents from private sector partners. This reinforces the migration rent-seeking strategy within its domestic migration management modality.

Tadbeer not only outsources its administrative capacity to private sector partners but also attempts to extract migration rent from private sector partners (i.e., for

Table 1: Sample Tadbeer Fees

Components	Tadbeer Sponsorship
Years valid	Two years
Cost of sponsorship (i.e., entry permit, etc.)	AED 8,500
Cost of process and documentations (i.e., national ID documents, medical testing, deposits, insurance, gratuity)	AED 15,000 (for expatriate employers)
Approximate total costs (for domestic work recruitment, employment, and residence processing)	AED 23,500 (approximately $6,400)

Source: Author's interview with a Tadbeer manager in Dubai

violations) and migrant laborers (via recruitment fees, taxes, penalties, and other documentation fees). Table 1 below shows an example of transaction costs extracted from employers in the UAE, totaling approximately $6,400 per employer in the UAE. These fees are not just taxed but also generated through certain government processes (i.e., applying for national Emirates ID, government-run medical testing facilities).

While the private sector historically monopolized domestic work sector processes in the UAE, the current immigration rentier quasi-state actor via the Tadbeer system has become, de facto, state-controlled. This state-sponsored recruitment system collects substantial migration rents from employers and Tadbeer owners. For example, instead of institutionally developing public infrastructures to host Tadbeer offices, the UAE outsources institutional resources to Tadbeer private sector actors. These provide a variety of services with corresponding fees (rents) imposed on prospective employers, including but not limited to the following: recruitment and placement services; on-demand labor supply (full-time and part-time); visa services and entry processing; transfer of sponsorships; medical checks for workers; health insurance for domestic workers; transportation services for domestic workers to reach employers' houses from the airport; training and orientation upon arrival; and conflict resolution. With such a high demand for domestic workers and other low-wage workers (i.e., construction workers, cleaners, caregivers, etc.), these sites have become a vital source of migration rent for the UAE, with low state investments in Tadbeer private sector partners.

In addition, under the Tadbeer PPP agreement, UAE-based Tadbeer private sector partners are legally required to hire local Emiratis, as part of the Emirati state's efforts to increase Emirati labor market participation. This thereby shifts the economic responsibilities to pay costs (i.e., local workers' wages, pensions, etc.) to the private sector. Thus, the UAE not only extracts migration rents from domestic migration processes (i.e., migrant worker documentation, etc.) but also legally shifts some of its national state mandates (i.e., localizations) toward the private sector. This highlights the diverse flows of rent-seeking behavior outcomes (migration rent, institutional rents, and other capacity rents) within the Tadbeer system.

Tasheel

Developed in 2017, Tasheel is an immigration rentier quasi-state actor that offers "comprehensive online services covering the full spectrum of MOHRE application processes and more" (MOHRE 2024).[3] Tasheel, which is governed by MOHRE, sought to improve the government's infrastructure for dealing with labor processes. With approximately 90% (and counting) of the UAE's population consisting of migrant populations, the state has increasingly deinstitutionalized its domestic migration management by expediting and corporatizing the labor and employment processes (i.e., conflict resolutions, case management, labor permit application systems, discrepancy problems in labor processes and payments). Tasheel resulted from efforts to develop an all-encompassing platform that would address all employment-related issues in the UAE, and evolved into a digital online system, streamlining labor-related procedures for employers and employees. Tasheel also enables online MOHRE transactions and payment processing, thus increasing output and process efficacy.

The establishment of Tasheel represents an effort by the UAE to digitally monopolize control over the domestic migration administration of labor processes, using the private sector. It systematizes and monetizes substantial rents from migrant populations' domestic immigration requirements. Table 2 below highlights Tasheel's sample transactions with the corresponding fees, which are exacted from migrant populations (i.e., seeking new entry fees) and converted into federal state revenues via immigration rentier quasi-state actors like Tasheel. These immigration rentier quasi-state actors have become vital rent collectors for federal and local Emirati state entities and thus play a central role within the UAE's domestic migration management apparatus.

Table 2: Sample Tasheel Fees

Selected Transaction or Application	Fees (AED)
Sponsorship registration	268.90
Entry permit (cancel or residence)	188.90
Entry permit (cancel or work)	209.66
New entry permit: short-term visit (single entry)	1,511
New entry permit: short-term visit (inside country)	2,189
New entry permit: temporary work permit (one month)	655
New entry permit: temporary work permit (three months)	955
New entry permit: temporary work permit (six months)	1,165
New entry permit: temporary work permit (one year)	1,955

Source: Tasheel Fees & Payments (2023)

With the growing influx of temporary migrant populations in the UAE, the institutional burden and pressures to deal with the complexities of daily labor processing have also grown. These are crucial incentives for the UAE to defer to Tadbeer actors, which extract rents from migrant populations with low infrastructure investments. These migration rents have become essential federal revenue sources, enabling the UAE—and particularly Dubai—to generate state capital. The immigration rentier quasi-state actors have also become a growing alternative source of employment opportunities for Emirati nationals, thereby directly serving the national development plans for the Emiratization of their labor markets. Overall, the UAE's outsourcing of labor processing, via immigration rentier quasi-state actors like Tasheel, results from its limited institutional capacity to regulate labor processing while extracting rents from migrant populations.

Amer

Amer is an Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actor designed to provide a one-stop shop for immigration-related processing. It links to the Ministry of Interior's transactions for migrant populations in the UAE. Established in 2017, Amer 24/7 Center was the first UAE state-approved and affiliated organization established in collaboration with the General Directorate of Residency and Foreign Affairs. It was a direct application of the government's strategy as advocated by the Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. Amer, like Tadbeer and Tasheel, is both a private sector entity and a state actor and regulates immigration documentation procedure in the UAE. Amer's licensed private sector entities conduct most government processing operations, offering multiple services, including immigration services (i.e., entry permit and residence for individuals and family members); UAE identification document services pricing; medical test servicing pricing; health insurance service pricing; establishment card issuing, renewal, and cancellation services; and residence pricing (i.e., obtaining a residence).

Table 3 Selected Amer Transactions

Selected Transaction Linked to Migrants' Residency Processes	Fees (AED)
Obtain residence/transfer residence to new passport from another passport	259.90
Obtain residence / renew residence/ renew residence for wife and children	359.90
Obtain residence / cancel residence	305.65
Obtain or renew residence either in the private sector or free zone local establishment	676.65
Residence transfer sponsor to (new) sponsor	1,405.65

Table 3 shows an example of Amer transactions in the UAE, highlighting the costliness for migrants and the high profitability of domestic migration procedures for the state.

Beyond the domestic processing of migrant populations, Amer selectively caters to the immigration needs of prospective migrants from select Western countries, such as Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe, who wish to migrate to the UAE as skilled workers. This service efficiently processes skilled migrant populations, who are essential for the UAE's future knowledge economy and diversification plans. Thus, immigration rentier quasi-state actors like Amer serve as centralized sources of virtual service that enable residents to complete all immigration-related procedures_as well as being vital sites of rent-seeking extraction (i.e., taxes, penalties, etc.) within the UAE's domestic migration management system.

Conclusions

This paper examined Emirati immigration rentier quasi-state actors and their rent-seeking strategies, processes, and behaviors within the domestic migration management context of the Global South. With the escalating influx of migrant populations into the GCC, there is a critical need to contextualize the emerging role of immigration rentier quasi-states and their rent-seeking behaviors. Using a case study analysis of the UAE, I argued that the presence of immigration rentier quasi-state actors (namely Tadbeer, Tasheel, and Amer) highlight the state's need to exert transnational control over migrant inflows, driven by both domestic and foreign policy considerations. In delegating administrative functions to private entities through PPP arrangements, the UAE displays its absolute power and capacity to govern and capture the private sector. Despite institutional constraints, the state acquires migration rents that are essential for its everyday operations. The article also emphasizes how host states like the UAE exercise domestic and international rentier techniques to reap economic benefits from crucial source countries in the Global South.

Beyond the UAE, there is also growing utilization of immigration rentier quasi-state actors in other GCC states, with varied rentierism techniques. In Qatar, the government has established collaborations with visa center organizations based in India, creating many visa service centers in India to manage migration and extract migration rents from prospective migrants bound for Qatar. These centers are strategically situated in areas considered significant sources of labor migration to Qatar, to facilitate efficient migration processes. In Saudi Arabia, the government has established an implementation agency

called Takamol, which operates as a quasi-state entity. This agency has introduced a need for migrant construction workers in 19 specific vocations to undergo training and certification tests. The cost of these examinations is $80 for each person aiming to work in Saudi Arabia, enabling the Saudi state to extract millions from immigration policy requirements for low-skilled migrant construction workers. The increasing prevalence of rent-seeking behavior in GCC nations, both domestically and internationally, presents an opportunity to examine how other regional hosts and sending states utilize various rentiering behaviors beyond immigration (i.e., such as exile or emigration).

Ultimately, while the host states' increasing use of immigration rentier quasi-state approaches indicate a decreased control over domestic migration management, it may also signal a sophisticated institutional strategy aiming to outsource and capitalize on present and future migration flows into their respective domestic borders.

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Non-Monetary Rent?

Examining the Rentier Migration Diplomacy of the GCC States' Relations with Countries of Origin

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The rentier Gulf States have long been reliant on cheap migrant labor for their economies to function (Thiollet, 2023). In more recent times, other Middle Eastern states have come to use their hosting of refugees as a means of generating rents from richer states, who are eager to keep refugees at arm's length (Tsourapas, 2021). While in the first of these types the pre-existing rents generated by hydrocarbons create the demand for labor required by these rentier Gulf States, the second type uses the very presence of migrants and refugees to generate needed income from elsewhere.

These appear to be axiomatically different. The concept of "migration (or refugee) rentierism", which has largely been used to refer to the use of migrants to generate income, is still quite recent and thus fluid.[1] Indeed, this is one of its strengths as a concept, in that it allows us to think about how states can use migration - not just as an economic lever but also as a tool of power and influence.

We know of the high-profile cases of the North Korean state sending citizens overseas for work under tight control, then taking their wages to fill gaps in the regime's supply of hard currency (Park, 2009). Likewise, Cuba has regularly used its surplus of doctors as a tool of foreign policy to generate soft power benefits (Baggott and Lambie, 2019). These two radically different examples can, in fact, best be conceived as two ends of the same spectrum, that of states using their workforce internationally to their own advantage. But what of the receiving states?

In the Gulf, recent years have seen a significant diversification of the countries of origin of migrant workers. The relative numerical dominance of migrants from India, Pakistan and the Philippines has decreased, and many new countries have sent significant numbers of migrant workers, particularly places such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and Kenya. A decade ago these countries hardly registered numerically in the data. This change is not accidental. A number of dynamics are behind it, from nervousness around large numbers of migrant workers from a single country, to economic diversification schemes - especially in tourism, which require large numbers of better educated and English speaking workers. The change is also related to a more activist stance on migrant workers' rights from some countries of origin, especially the Philippines (Ruiz, 2020; Malit and Tsourapas, 2021b), which is uncomfortable for some Gulf States.

This diversification phenomenon has occurred alongside a bewildering array of changes to visa availability, types and processes. There have even recently been amendments to elements of the Kafala system itself in some states, such as Qatar. The very system which has been foundational in enabling rigid state control over migration. Ultimately it means that, now more than ever, visas are a product. They are a kind of (non-monetary) rent in their own right, which is created by the state to achieve an increasingly broad array of objectives - societal, political, diplomatic and economic - rather than a means of generating revenues alone.

By helping to illuminate these political and power elements, the concept of "non-monetary rent" as an additional category of analysis therefore goes beyond the usual economic dimensions of the relatively new concept of rentier migration. Furthermore, this paper argues that the recent phenomenon of structured diversification of migrant origin into the GCC states links to the potential

for generation of these non-monetary rents. In doing so, it demonstrates how GCC states are beginning to use visas as non-monetary rent to achieve diplomatic and political outcomes that money alone cannot necessarily buy.

Given most GCC states' increased activism in their foreign policies, the paper argues that one of the key uses of "rentier migration" is increasingly as a tool of diplomacy. Using access to their labor markets to influence the countries of origin of the migrants they host through increased remittance flows and reduction of unemployment, the GCC states can also use the supply of work visas in their relations with other states to elicit non-monetary benefits. This is, however, not as simple as it first appears. As these are complex nested processes within migration diplomacy and wider diplomatic relationships, they often take place through third parties and are influenced by domestic politics.

In putting forward the idea of migration control acting as a way of generating forms of non-monetary rent, this paper proposes a complementary approach to examining monetary forms of migration rent in the existing literature. It also offers a useful tool which opens up possibilities for research which can add to our understanding of authoritarian politics, migration and geopolitics, in both the Gulf and beyond.

Conceptualizing Non-Monetary Rent

Rent is a well-established concept in political economy. The word itself is of course intrinsically linked to economics. Since it is associated with essentially unearned—or low input yet high profit margin—monetary income from a natural resource, there is naturally a considerable bias toward studying it from a financial and economic angle (Ahumada, 2023). This has led, logically but also problematically, to a significant focus on the economic value of rent and only a generally narrow interpretation of its political consequences (Yamada and Hertog, 2020).

While not usually understood in this way, it is however clear when conceptualized in this manner, that visas can thus be seen as a form of rent, which is, actually in many senses, cheaper to produce than oil and gas. Their immediate cost for the state itself, on a simplistic reading, is bureaucrats' time and some stationery.[2] For the Gulf States where the state sector has been broadly nationalized in terms of its labor force, salaries paid by the state itself largely remain in the country. Demand for migrant labor mostly comes from the private sector, which pays lower salaries and struggles to attract nationals to work there (Al-Asfour, Rajasekar and Charkasova, 2022). There is a divide between the richer and poorer Gulf States and those with larger populations than others, so the picture is nuanced. But, generally speaking, demand for migrant workers lies in the private sector, and thus the burden of paying migrants does not fall on the state itself.[3]

Host states are also motivated to attract certain highly skilled or high-net-worth individuals. In these cases, visas are a direct product that can be sold in return either for high-value skills, or for what is essentially foreign direct investment (FDI) which boosts productivity and consumer and investment spending. These cases form a different category of rent that is less connected to forms of migration diplomacy, particularly given different levels of agency and power dynamics. In this paper focuses instead on migration for work by poorer people from the Global South in less skilled or unskilled roles. Often, these workers are recruited by powerful state or semi-state agencies - which have complex domestic lineages and deep connections with the state in sending countries (Malit and Tsourapas, 2021a; Malit, this volume). This reality makes non-monetary rent a complex element to study.

Beyond the Gulf, visas are increasingly seen as tools of economic statecraft. Just taking the most recent examples related to the UK and its attempts to strike complex free trade agreements with India and Australia highlights this fact. Visas have featured strongly in negotiations and are seen as a major stumbling block to a deal with India, which is demanding access for hundreds of thousands of its citizens to work in the UK in return for wider market access, especially in services (Anon, 2023). Meanwhile, in the UK's completed deal with Australia, the visa rules

between the two countries for professionals, business exchanges and young workers were relaxed significantly.[4]

As such, visas are leverage for other economic concessions and thus remain intrinsically linked to economic gain. The usual associations with the concepts of rent and visas are wrapped up in the economic or financial domain - whether that be direct income, access to cheap labor, or leverage in market access negotiations. What, then, might the concept of non-monetary rent entail?

There are perhaps two possible forms of non-monetary rent. Firstly, there are goods exchanged in lieu of money as a kind of barter. Secondly, and far more interestingly, there is the issuance of visas as a form of rent that generates returns for the state which are not economic in nature. In this sense, smaller, weaker and poorer countries have a form of rent of their own which is in demand: their voice and vote in international fora, as well as in international relations more generally. In this case visas, which have a monetary value for the receiving state but cost nothing to produce, are exchanged for diplomatic and political support. Importantly, visas can also be used as tools of diplomacy and geo-strategy in combination with other tools of economic statecraft, such as trade concessions, FDI and development aid.[5]

Non-monetary rent does not necessarily mean that economic elements of the engagement are absent, but it might mean that they are secondary. Visas have clear monetary value for the state, as well as for the people that receive them. In addition to the cheap labor, which is generally an intrinsic part of the bargain for the visa-issuing country, there are other additional benefits, the value of which might outweigh the "main" part of the transaction. One might be able to buy this diplomatic and political support through other measures. However, this will often cost actual money rather than deriving from the direct creation of a form of rent which has a monetary value but costs nothing to produce. Importantly, this monetary value must also be supplemented by the utilization—and the political benefits—of this non-monetary or power value. In other words, while non-monetary rents can have monetary value, their generation of diplomatic and political outcomes is their primary importance and value.

It is clear therefore that from this conception of non-monetary rent we are led into a reality in which a kind of a hierarchy exists. The value of visas in diplomacy is very high in some contexts and very low, or perhaps non-existent, in other contexts. It is also a significant diplomatic and political challenge to know when and how to deploy the rent of visas to entice the type of non-monetary rent desired (i.e., diplomatic or other support). It depends on the context, value and the priority hierarchies of other actors. The specific transmission mechanisms of how migration processes function are likely to make the generation of non-monetary rents from visas more potent—especially how they tie into networks of patronage politics and the realities of economic vulnerability in the sending state.

Finally, one can also further conceptualize the idea of non-monetary rent as the direct, purposive extraction of concessions or support. This could be in terms of votes or a change of stance or position on an issue, which might be termed a "deliberate rent", which could be linked to a particular deal or negotiation for visas. On the other hand, a more "implicit rent" is a longer-term tying together of two countries, which leads to implied or necessary changes in the way the state receiving visas behaves more broadly, making it less likely to want to disrupt visa issuance.[6] Once again, this would depend on the nature of the hierarchy and what each state has to offer, which in turn links to global power dynamics, as well as to the domestic politics and priorities of sending and receiving states.

The Changing and Unchanging (Migration) Environment of the Gulf

It is not just the nature, volume and type of migration to the Gulf that has been changing. The context in which migration to the Gulf takes place has also been evolving

- in terms of the economic context of diversification, relatively high oil prices and the search for increased FDI, as well as the geo-strategic context. The rise of Iran in the region (Worrall and Saleh, 2020), uncertainty over United States commitments under both Obama and Trump (Lynch, 2015; Ahmadian, 2023), the shock of the Arab Spring and the rising ambitions of the rulers of the Gulf States have all combined in complex ways to make the region more volatile than ever before.

This has affected some Gulf States more than others, but there has been a step change in the confidence and willingness of states to leverage all tools at their disposal. This is particularly the case for Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, which have augmented and utilized their power across multiple domains to secure strategic advantages in ways that seemed inconceivable at the start of the century. These include military interventions in Yemen and Libya and large scale political and economic engagement across the Horn of Africa, as well as huge investments in sport, culture and education through the 2022 World Cup, Expo 2020, branch campuses and mass tourism.

These developments have created greater demand for migrant workers, considerable global attention on the plight of migrant workers in the region, and, in turn, significant change in the ways migration is managed.[7] Much of this falls beyond the scope of this paper, but remains important contextually. Collectively these significant changes across the Gulf, and particularly for the three states in question, the intersection of these changes has driven a diversification of migrant countries of origin and a new utilization of visas as a different foreign policy tool, which can generate diplomatic and political benefits that reinforce the wider geo-strategic aims of these countries. These connections are not easy to untangle, but they are becoming increasingly visible, which helps us begin to define and utilize the concept of "non-monetary rent".

The Diversification of Migrants by Origin

Since 2010, there has been an important change in the mosaic of migration across the Gulf that has mostly gone unnoticed. While the composition of the top 10 countries of origin has changed relatively little, and the traditional countries of origin such as India, Pakistan and the Philippines still make up the majority of migrants,[8] this conceals a wider and important trend. Below the top 10, or even the top 5, there has been a considerable widening of both the numbers of countries of origin, as well as a very rapid expansion of actual numbers of migrants from a group of countries, especially those in East Africa. Rather than examining the Gulf as a whole, it makes sense to focus instead here on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. These countries have implemented the most activist foreign policies since the Arab Spring, they have the largest economies of the region, and thus they also have the largest markets for foreign labor.

There are many reasons for the expansion of the numbers of countries of origin and the scale of migration from them. These include the nature of the labor force in countries of origin, levels of education, English language capabilities, religious affinities, the price of labor itself, political sensitivities and, as this paper argues, the geopolitical ambitions of the receiving states.

The argument in this paper is not that non-monetary forms of rent are the primary reason for the expansion of the range of countries of origin and scale of migration. These forms of rent are, however, a useful additional product for the Gulf States, especially in the context of an increasingly activist and possibly even domineering foreign policy, particularly in East Africa and the Horn.

While there have been increases in the numbers of migrant workers from the traditional countries of origin (India, Pakistan and the Philippines), numbers have risen from new countries significantly across the Gulf. Given the pre-existing dominance of certain nationalities and their established pathways for migration, one would expect

to see this, especially with the economic expansion and ambitions of the GCC states. It is, however, noticeable that the rise of migrants from new countries of origin has been swift, often from extremely low bases, leading to very significant percentage increases, and in many cases also substantial overall numbers.

From a diplomatic perspective, the expansion of the range of countries of origin has the added benefit, from a wider viewpoint, that the more countries are sending large numbers of migrants the more those complex chains of migration are established. The more path dependencies are established, the easier it is for some GCC states to credibly threaten those countries. Sending states know that the visa tap can be turned on and off and that there are other rivals who can fill gaps in the supply of migrant workers relatively quickly. This is a tool which is both directly related to the nature of migration to Gulf as a resource, which needs to remain cheap and quiescent, but can also relate to the wider foreign policy environment. Thus we saw very quickly, for example, in the aftermath of Yemen and Palestine's support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, that the Gulf States punished those countries by expelling their citizens and cancelling visas, thereby curbing remittance flows. While this is an extreme example that was linked to existential security concerns, it does demonstrate that migration diplomacy through the control of the flow of visas can be used to affect diplomatic outcomes.

This also takes us into the domestic politics of the countries of origin and raises the need for country-specific examination of clientelist networks, power structures and the extent to which visa politics becomes a domestic tool of patronage. The more these migration paths and domestic migration-reliant clientelist networks become embedded, the more reliable the non-monetary rent benefits are likely to become.

There are some differences in the scale of migration by countries of origin to the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, the broad pattern across all three countries is consistent: there is significant diversification, with a dramatic rise in numbers from some countries, often from very low levels a decade ago.

The benefits of diversification are manifest and numerous, but in terms of the specific focus of this paper on rentier migration diplomacy, the concept also makes real sense. The more countries that send significant numbers of migrants to the Gulf States, the more opportunities there are for the creation of non-monetary diplomatic and political rents. What is the sense in having all of your migrants coming from just a few countries when they could instead come from many more, and thus offer more opportunities for influence? Especially in a world where the Gulf States are much more engaged and activist in their foreign policies.

To illustrate the dramatic change in the range of countries of origin, the significant percentage increases over the past decade and the absolute numbers involved, the following graphs and tables take a range of countries of origin which have sent more migrants to the Gulf between 2010 and 2023. The data is collected from International Labour Organisation sources, triangulated with data from the GLMM, national data (where available) and a range of other academic sources. As with all Gulf data, it has flaws and is not fully reliable. Nevertheless, the trends are important for the argument of this paper rather than the exact numbers, and those trends are stark and clear.

This diversification in the range of migrants from specific countries of origin has some differentiation across the three states. The following tables and graphs examine migrant arrivals from five non-traditional countries of origin, namely: Somalia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Indonesia. Data for other countries, such as Burma, Uganda, and Ethiopia, were also examined, but are not included here because they were either patchier in nature and/or unavailable from the same sources. However, the trends were generally similar in these other cases, exhibiting similar trajectories.

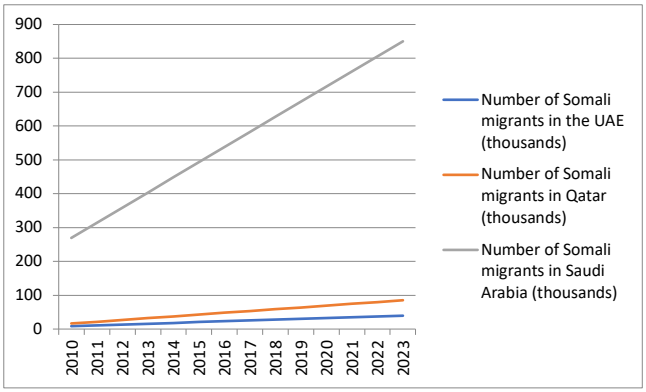
Table 1: Somali Migrants in the UAE

Year	Number of Somali migrants in the UAE (thousands)	Number of Somali migrants in Qatar (thousands)	Number of Somali migrants in Saudi Arabia (thousands)
2010	8.8	16.4	269.6
2011	11.2	21.7	314.3
2012	13.6	27	359
2013	16	32.3	403.7
2014	18.4	37.6	448.4
2015	20.8	42.9	493.1
2016	23.2	48.2	537.8
2017	25.6	53.5	582.5
2018	28	58.8	627.2
2019	30.4	64.1	671.9
2020	32.8	69.4	716.6
2021	35.2	74.7	761.3
2022	37.6	80	806
2023	39.9	85.3	850.7

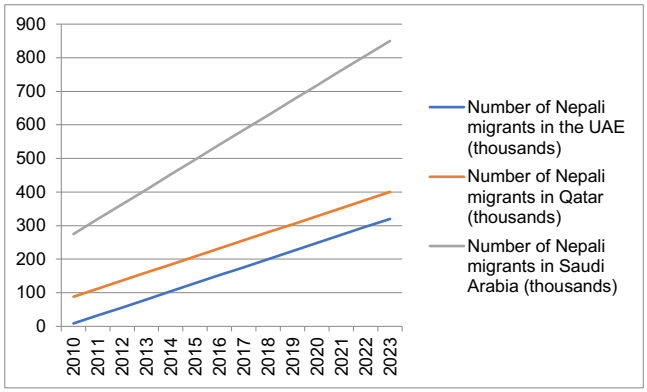
Table 2: Nepali Migrants in the UAE

Year	Number of Nepali migrants in the UAE (thousands)	Number of Nepali migrants in Qatar (thousands)	Number of Nepali migrants in Saudi Arabia (thousands)
2010	8	88	274.8
2011	32	112	319.1
2012	56	136	363.4
2013	80	160	407.7
2014	104	184	452
2015	128	208	496.3
2016	152	232	540.6
2017	176	256	584.9
2018	200	280	629.2
2019	224	304	673.5
2020	248	328	717.8
2021	272	352	762.1
2022	296	376	806.4
2023	320	400	850.7

Graph 1: Somali Migrants in the UAE



Graph 2: Nepali Migrants in the UAE



While the absolute increases in Somali migrants in the UAE and Qatar are relatively minor, especially in comparison with the absolute numbers of other migrants, they still represent a 353% and 420% increase respectively. In Saudi Arabia, a smaller 215% increase is actually a numerical increase of almost 600,000 workers in a little over a decade. This would, by most estimates, now place Somalis within the top 10 migrant nationalities in Saudi Arabia (De Bel Air, 2018).

The data for Nepalese migrants shows a similar pattern, a tripling of numbers in both the UAE and Qatar, and a doubling of these numbers in Saudi Arabia. The difference here is that the actual numbers across all three cases are substantial. Again, the numbers of Nepalese migrants in Saudi Arabia now probably puts them close to being a top 10 nation. In both Qatar and the UAE Nepalese migrants now sit inside that marker, representing a huge change, especially given that the UAE started with very few Nepalese migrants in 2010.

Table 3: Sri Lankan Migrants in the UAE

Year	Number of Sri Lankan migrants in the UAE (thousands)	Number of Sri Lankan migrants in Qatar (thousands)	Number of Sri Lankan migrants in Saudi Arabia (thousands)
2010	40	50	8
2011	72	60	20
2012	104	70	32
2013	136	80	44
2014	168	90	56
2015	200	100	68
2016	232	110	80
2017	264	120	92
2018	296	130	104
2019	328	140	116
2020	360	150	128
2021	392	160	140
2022	424	170	152
2023	456	180	164

Table 4: Kenyan Migrants in the UAE

Year	Number of Kenyan migrants in the UAE (thousands)	Number of Kenyan migrants in Qatar (thousands)	Number of Kenyan migrants in Saudi Arabia (thousands)
2010	40	50	8
2011	72	60	20
2012	104	70	32
2013	136	80	44
2014	168	90	56
2015	200	100	68
2016	232	110	80
2017	264	120	92
2018	296	130	104
2019	328	140	116
2020	360	150	128
2021	392	160	140
2022	424	170	152
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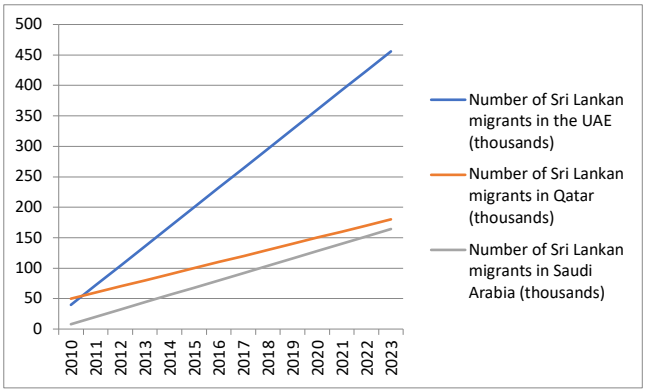
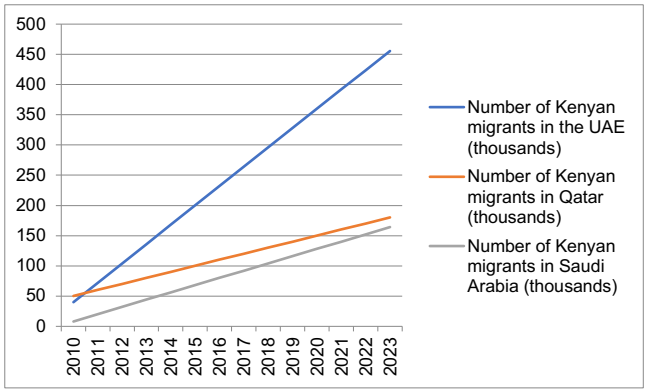
Graph 3: Sri Lankan Migrants in the UAE



Graph 4: Kenyan Migrants in the UAE

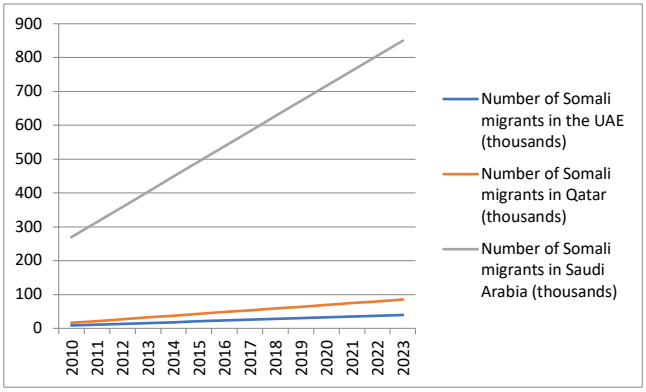


There were low numbers of Sri Lankan migrants across all three states in 2010, but since then these numbers have increased steadily in absolute number both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These increases are more significant in percentage terms - rising by 260% in Qatar and 1,950% in Saudi Arabia. However, in the UAE, numbers of Sri Lankan migrants have risen dramatically in both absolute and percentage terms, from below 50,000 to 450,000 migrants in just over a decade. To put this in context, Sri Lankans now make up around 5% of the UAE population, which is a similar proportion as the long-established Iranian community (Anon, 2024).

Table 5: Indonesian Migrants in the UAE

Year	Number of Indonesian migrants in the UAE (thousands)	Number of Indonesian migrants in Qatar (thousands)	Number of Indonesian migrants in Saudi Arabia (thousands)
2010	36	20	16
2011	54	30	24
2012	72	40	32
2013	90	50	40
2014	108	60	48
2015	126	70	56
2016	144	80	64
2017	162	90	72
2018	180	100	80
2019	198	110	88
2020	216	120	96
2021	234	130	104
2022	252	140	112
2023	270	150	120

Graph 5: Indonesian Migrants in the UAE



Across all five cases, there have been significant increases in both absolute and percentage terms of migrants entering the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, often from a negligible base. There are interesting patterns in terms of some nationalities heading to specific countries in very large numbers, such as Somalis to Saudi Arabia, and Indonesians and Sri Lankans to the UAE. Nepalis, meanwhile, are more evenly spread.

These dramatic rises are the result of a strategic desire for diversification on the part of the Gulf States and a desire to exploit opportunities by sending states. The Ugandan government, for instance, has a Strategic Labour Externalisation Programme (Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2017).

Conclusion: Disentangling Relations of Dominance

One of the key problems in tracking back non-monetary forms of rent is that the foreign policies pursued by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE over the past 15 years have been highly activist on a number of fronts (Clausen, 2019; Mansour, 2016). As we can see from the data above, there has been a very significant increase in the numbers of migrants from East Africa to these states. Simultaneously, these states have made a range of other significant diplomatic moves into the region. Additionally, a large number of investments and partnerships led by parastatal or state-owned companies have also been made (Donelli and Dentice, 2020). The UAE in particular has also been very active in recent years through offering wider market access, free trade agreements, or deeper Comprehensive Economic Agreements. All of these investments and economic carrots have foreign policy linkages. Alongside these, rentier migration diplomacy can act as a further tool in the state's foreign policy toolbox, because it offers a form of non-monetary rent which can supplement other tools of economic statecraft and offers multiple tangible benefits. For example, 16 treaties have been signed between Kenya and the UAE since 2010, with the majority signed post-2015. This is a significant flurry of diplomatic activity compared with prior decades and includes a recent agreement on extending visit visas for Kenyans to have more time to find work in the Emirates (Anon, 2022).

This paper has highlighted the growing diversification of countries of origin of migrants to the Gulf States and has also advanced the idea of "non-monetary rents" as a useful additional conceptual tool with which to analyze the foreign and security policies of the Gulf States. It offered an initial conceptual development of these non-monetary rents, so that rentier migration diplomacy can be better

understood and conceptualized, in order to understand the changing nature of dynamics within migration flows more broadly. There is, however, further work to be done in exploring specific dynamics and disentangling these processes to understand the exact transmission pathways, political logics and the impacts of this phenomenon.

The next step in this process is to map the ways in which visas are allocated to different third states and the extent to which there are any correlations with changes in foreign policy stances of sending states. This could include examining changes in current and historic voting patterns at, for example, the United Nations General Assembly, the International Labour Organisation and the UN Human Rights Council. It is also important to track complicating variables, namely FDI deals and land purchases. Finally, it is essential to acknowledge that the collection of non-monetary rent through rentier migration diplomacy might often form part of a "package deal" of incentives and threats within a wider relationship, involving both *deliberate* and *implicit* forms of non-monetary rent generation.

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Endnotes

1 As the rich contributions in this volume attest, see: Lynch and Tsourapas (2024).
2 There are of course potential social and political costs as well, hence all Gulf states "isation" schemes to secure jobs for citizens at the expense of migrants in some sectors.
3 One could make the argument that given the nexus between ministers and senior bureaucrats and their own investments in the private sector that the division between the state and the private sector is somewhat blurred but the specific impacts of this are difficult to trace.
4 For details on the mobility element of the new UK–Australia Free Trade Agreement see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61b9b783e90e0704439f4400/uk-australia-free-trade-agreement-fta-mobility-explainer.pdf.
5 This is something which the Gulf States have invested in significantly over the past decade. See: Young (2023).
6 These sorts of dynamics can be positive for both sides Ilyssa Yahmi (2024) demonstrates in the very different context of EU-North Africa Relations, which also reveals diplomatic level coercion. As Micinski and Norman (2024) also show, interactions of this kind are far more nuanced than they might seem.
7 There is not yet any clear evidence that the very significant increase in demand for migrant labor in the Gulf which is needed to deliver the breakneck construction boom of mega-projects such as the world cup stadia in Qatar, new railways lines across the Gulf and The Line and Neom in Saudi Arabia, among many others, has changed the power dynamic between sending and receiving states. However this is a possibility, especially given tight deadlines. In discussions across the Gulf with recruiters and managers in the hospitality sector I have heard complaints about increased

difficulty or recruiting and retaining the right staff which seem much more acute than a decade ago. Much more research, particularly on the construction sector is required, but this remains a sensitive topic given international human rights attention on the issue. I am grateful to Marc Lynch for encouraging me to explore this point here.

[8] As Babar (2024) in her memorable phrase states, migrants on the GCC-South Asia Corridor, continue to find themselves "rentiered at both ends".

Migration Rentierism in the Middle East

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Introduction

The complex histories of migration into, out of, and across the Middle East have historically provided a fruitful area for social scientists to theorize beyond empirically grounded research. This volume of the POMEPS Studies series aims to understand the political economy of migration in the Middle East by drawing on the concepts of rent and rent-seeking, as these originated from the study of oil-producing states in the Middle East (POMEPS Introduction). In this theoretical piece, we analyze how varied types of cross-border mobility can be brought together under the overarching theoretical framework of migration rentierism and identify promising future avenues of research. Initially, we identify the need for an expansive framework of migration politics in the Middle East that considers the artificial distinctions between different types of mobility, the various levels through which migration rentierism politics operate, and how these may serve as material and immaterial resources for states and non-state actors alike. We proceed by offering a definition of migration rent and migration rentierism before discussing four types of migration rentier states in the Middle East: emigration, immigration, exile, and refugee rentier states. We call for a more nuanced understanding of the politics of Middle East migration and conclude with avenues for future research.

The concept of rent has recently been introduced across studies on migration politics in two ways. On the one hand, "refugee rentier states" employ their position as host states of forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or "refugee rent," from other state or non-state actors to maintain these populations within their borders (Tsourapas 2019). Far from being an idiosyncrasy of Middle East states, refugee rent-seeking behavior is expanding across both the Global South (Micinski 2021) and the Global North (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). On the other hand, rentier states are heavily reliant upon immigration for their wealth and political stability, deriving unearned income and political benefits from immigration as "migration rent" (Thiollet 2019; 2021). Immigration rentier states emerged as governments progressively bureaucratized the political and financial rent extracted from the control of immigrants' sojourn and labor, which was initially brokered by private actors, notably in the MENA region through the Kafala system (Thiollet 2024).

The concepts of refugee and immigration rentier states have proven fruitful and generative to understand (forced) migration politics in the region and beyond. Still, current theorization of migration merits expansion to accommodate the full gamut of human mobility, including labor emigration and forced exile. We acknowledge the limits of dichotomous approaches to human mobility that artificially separate forced from so-called voluntary migration and refugees from other migrants based on legally designed and policy-driven distinctions rather than migrants' experiences (Bakewell 2021; Thiollet, Pastore, and Schmoll 2023). In the Middle East, the constructed nature of distinctions established between forced and voluntary migration stands out as only Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Yemen have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. Across the region, migration and refugee policies operate within common frames and use common instruments, yet with differentiated implementation across migrant groups based on geopolitical and economic interests as well as moral and symbolic drivers of protection (Elmadmad 2002; 2008; Chatty 2013). As such, the distinction between forced and voluntary or economic mobility typically relies upon political operations of selection and differentiation between groups of migrants. Such operations are framed here as moral economy and are part and parcel of the political economy of migration rentierism. This understanding of the forced or voluntary migration distinction emphasizes the importance of material

or moral preferences and rationalities in migration policymaking.

At the same time, an expanded framework needs to feed into larger debates on how mobility constitutes a political and economic resource for state and non-state actors alike, while also engaging with long-standing discussions on the political pathologies of rentierism. In order to do so, we distance our contribution from overly psychological takes on so-called rentier mentalities, which tend to essentialize individuals and groups (Hertog 2020). Instead, we refer both the strategic and moral approaches to rent-seeking mechanisms using the overarching notion of a "moral economy" (Thompson 1971), which provides moral value and justifications for given political behaviors. By offering a novel theoretical framework that remains empirically grounded in the Middle East, we also seek to expand the theoretical reach of concepts empirically grounded in the non-Western contexts to broader theories of migration, thereby decentering the scientific gaze (Liu-Farrer and Yeoh 2018; Chung 2017).

Conceptually, we take these considerations into account as we put forth migration rent as an object of analysis that refers to the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of material and immaterial income from labor and forced migration. Migration rent corresponds to both socio-economic and political resources, which may be derived either from controlling the movement of people into, across, or out of countries or from the exploitation of foreign labor, foreign identities, and the lives of (forced) migrants. Our concept of migration rent combines various forms of economic and political rent, including financial, social, and political remittances, and income extraction through exchange rates and financial infrastructures or direct and indirect taxes; in sum, all forms of economic and symbolic capital derived from policies related to cross-border population mobility. We argue that the political economy of the Middle East cannot be disassociated from migration rentierism, namely the political operations around the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of material and immaterial migration rent. Varied forms of migration rentierism operate across domestic, international, and transnational levels that involve both state and non-state actors. For the purposes of this piece, a central component of these processes is the migration rentier state, namely state or quasi-state entities that organize the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of migration rent through contingent policies as well as formal and informal institutions.

Unpacking Migration Rentierism in the Middle East

We identify four types of migration rentier states, relying on two sets of distinction: between mostly economically driven migration (or, labor migration), and forced displacement (or, forced migration); and between out-migration and in-migration. We consider both formal and informal processes and institutions at work in the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of migration rent, and note the need to factor in connections between state and societal institutions, as well as the role of institutional configurations and moral economies.[1] We identify four types of rentierism: *emigration rentierism*, in

Table 1: Four Types of Migration Rentier States

	Out-migration	**In-migration**
Labor migration	**Emigration rentierism** *Rent-seeking as development*	**Immigration rentierism** *Rent-seeking as membership*
Forced migration	**Exile rentierism** *Rent-seeking as appropriation*	**Refugee rentierism** *Rent-seeking as solidarity*

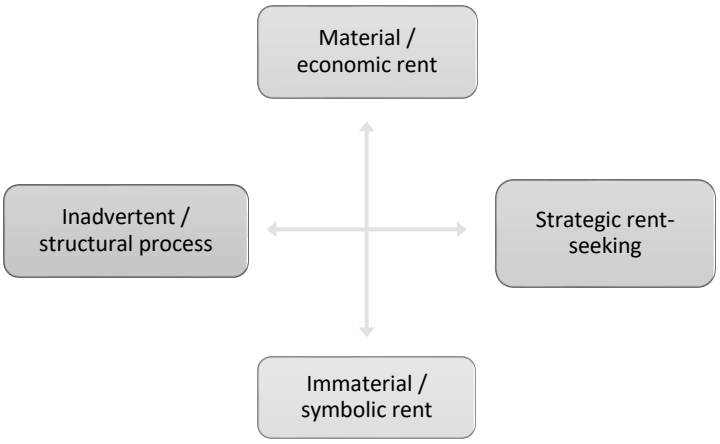
which rent-seeking is implicated in processes of political and economic development; *immigration rentierism*, which links rent-seeking to questions of socio-economic and political membership; *exile rentierism*, where rent-seeking relies on strategies of appropriation; and, finally, *refugee rentierism*, where rent-seeking is implicated in questions of solidarity.[2]

We also examine the nature of migration rent and the various ways it is extracted (or not) across policy levels. We consider various types of mechanisms and policies involved in migration rent-seeking (extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution), including formal and informal processes and institutions at the domestic, international, and transnational levels. Rent-seeking can be strategic and explicitly framed in contingent refugee or migration policies to gain advantages, symbolic or material, at the domestic, transnational, or international levels. Rent-seeking is also embedded in institutions and social structures with little or no explicit politicization. As such, it can be structural, "inadvertent," or accidental and thus include a continuum of drivers of political outcomes from institutions to policymaking, or the absence of formal policymaking altogether (Mufti 2014). Finally, although we focus on migration rentierism as a state-led process, we also consider the public–private partnerships at work in the design and implementation of (forced) migration policies. Notably, this helps to bring in the role of international and domestic intergovernmental and non-state actors such as diasporas, charities, civil society organizations, and international organizations. We reckon that these actors may operate against, for, or in partnership with states and state policies. These variations induce a complex array of configurations summarized in the matrix below.

Empirical Discussion

Emigration rentiers are actors that monetize labor mobility for purposes of *development*, as in the case of Yemen, Lebanon, or Egypt. The nature of this development is predominantly material or economic, and an extensive interdisciplinary literature has linked economic development and emigration (Haas, Castles, and Miller

Figure 1: Types of Rent and Types of Migration Rent-Seeking Processes



2020). But emigration rentierism also has a symbolic-political dimension as a nationalistic project involving mobilization of diasporas to extract financial and political remittances. States as well as private actors seek to harness "social remittances" (Levitt 1998) as cultural vectors of change. Others have focused on harnessing "political remittances" (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020), for instance via expatriate voting (Lafleur 2013). Over the last decade, an emerging literature on the politics of emigration across countries of origin, or "sending states," has sought to further explore the socio-economic and political connotations of emigration rentierism (Gamlen 2008). A second line of work seeks to problematize how emigration rentierism may be linked to regime stability in particular (Natter and Thiollet 2022).

Emigration rent-seeking strategies typically revolve around the construction of domestic institutions that seek to promote citizens' emigration abroad via legal or administrative policies (Brand 2006; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2023), as well as offering educational and training opportunities for prospective emigrants (Del Sordi 2018). Emigration rent-seeking may also seek to address other domestic political economy indicators, including unemployment and overpopulation (Martin 1991; Mosley and Singer 2015). States' dependence on emigration rent pushes labor emigration to the forefront of migration diplomacy (Thiollet 2011; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019).

While the literature has predominantly focused on the state as the main emigration rentier actor (Heisler 1985), private emigration rentiers are also active in the form of recruitment companies, brokers, and smugglers (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012).

Immigration rentiers are actors that seek to monetize *membership* to their domestic labor market, as in the cases of Libya or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Immigration rentiers are frequently states that face demographic constraints, namely the lack of a large enough—or sufficiently trained—domestic labor force, which leads them to rely on foreign labor to satisfy their labor market's unskilled, semi-skilled, or high-skilled needs. In such contexts, debates emerge around the permanence of such immigrant communities (Thiollet 2010; Lori 2019), the extent of immigrants' integration (Geddes 2001), and the protection of human rights (Jiménez-Alvarez, Espiñeira, and Gazzotti 2021). Invariably, questions of citizenship and citizenship regimes emerge. Recruitment firms, brokers, and a range of other non-state immigration rentier actors become implicated in regulating entry into these states' labor market (Thiollet 2019), oftentimes seeking to influence migration diplomacy (Malit and Tsourapas 2021).

Immigration rent-seeking comes in different forms. Historically, guest-worker programs in Europe and North America sought to address Western domestic labor market inefficiencies by recruiting unskilled and low-skilled foreign workers, whose presence in host states was intended to be timebound (Castles 1985). A similar contemporary phenomenon is GCC states' labor recruitment policies, which link membership of a GCC state's labor market to employment contracts. In the Middle East, as in Asia, these practices have enabled the structuring of a "migration industry" of private intermediaries (Beaugé 1986; Beaugrand and Thiollet 2023; Babar 2021). Some immigration rentier states are keen to adopt citizenship-by-investment and "golden visa" schemes, where matters of belonging, inclusion, and rights are defined in entrepreneurial, rather than legal, terms (Mavelli 2018; Shachar 2017).

Exile rentierism refers to actors that monetize forced displacement for legitimacy, economic resources, and state-building purposes via processes of positive and negative *appropriation*, as in the cases of Israel, Eritrea, South Sudan, as well as the Palestinian and Kurdish political organizations. Exile rentierism, as with other forms of rentierism, concerns both material and immaterial resources but with a strong emphasis on the moral economy of suffering and victimhood of refugees as a political ground for state-building claims. This element links many exile rentiers with the projection of a sense of suffering on the transnational stage and in multilateral politics. The Kurds (Kaya 2020) as well as the Palestinians (Sayigh 1997) have sought to legitimize their struggle for statehood using the symbolic capital of victimhood and refugeeism as well as the political legitimacy of state claims in regional ideologies (pan-Arabism). Historically, Jews, Armenians, and Eritreans (Thiollet 2018) have also leveraged claims of statehood and refugeeism to support their liberation struggles and state-building efforts. But states also engage in the process of exile rentierism, as they seek to continue processes of nation- and state-building, with (Craven 2021) or without (Moss 2022) the support of their diaspora communities.

Exile rent-seeking takes place via positive and/or negative appropriation of diasporic capital (Baser and Öztürk 2020). Positive appropriation is linked to diaspora activism that is perceived to contribute to state-building and legitimacy—state and non-state actors often draw on such diaspora communities for support (Margheritis 2015). Negative appropriation occurs when diaspora activism is perceived as a threat to state-building and legitimacy, leading to the development of transnational repression and authoritarianism by state and non-state actors alike (Glasius 2017; Tsourapas 2021). Appropriation concerns both political and economic capital. Researchers have highlighted the importance of refugees' remittances for regions of origin; they have also underlined the reliance of quasi-states or political organizations in exile on systems of taxation of diasporas of refugees: this is the case in Eritrea (Kibreab 2000) as well as in the case of Kurdish or Somali political organizations (Horst and Van Hear 2002).

Finally, the monetization of forced mobility by refugee rentiers has a distinctive element of *solidarity*, which we identify in the cases of Jordan, Türkiye, Sudan, and Iran. The literature has provided ample explanations for such interstate solidarity, which may be linked to economic structures, colonial linkages, postcolonial politics, or ethno-cultural or minority rights. Regional and political solidarity has consolidated into legal frameworks for refugee protection in Africa (Organisation for African Unity Convention) and Latin America (Cartagena Convention) and in the context of the League of Arab States. Typically, refugee rent-seeking revolves around solidarity mechanisms pegged to symbolic rewards for regimes granting asylum to selected groups of displaced persons (Chatty 2013), and around requests for economic concessions in the form of economic aid, preferential trade agreements, or other material benefits (Tsourapas 2019). Other states may target non-material concessions, for instance in the form of recognition of colonial-era injustices (Paoletti 2010). Refugee rentiers tend to rely on foreign policy to extract concessions (Micinski 2021).

Going Forward

In bringing together the established scholarship on rentierism with debates on migration politics, one contribution of this study is to identify how the concept of migration rent is able to shed much-needed light on complex processes of extraction, accumulation, and (re) distribution of income from labor and forced migration across the Middle East. We propose an expansive definition that encompasses both material and immaterial income, which may be derived either from controlling the movement of people into, across, or out of countries, or from the exploitation of foreign labor, foreign identities, and the lives of (forced) migrants. We define four different types of migration rentier states—emigration, immigration, exile, and refugee rentier states—that allow a re-examination of rent-seeking. In turn, this strengthens claims to development, membership, appropriation, and solidarity. In so doing, we pave the way for the varied analyses of the politics of migration rentierism across this POMEPS Studies issue, which draw from contemporary and historical case studies across the Middle East.

Going forward, we expect that the study of labor and forced migration through the prism of rent will allow a deeper understanding of the international politics of cross-border mobility—namely, how migration rent is *extracted*, *accumulated*, and *(re)distributed*. Focusing on extraction, the concept of migration rent sheds light on certain states' limited material resources, which prevents them from supporting large numbers of forcibly displaced populations, or on others' structural dependence on processes of labor emigration or immigration. It also allows for clearer identification of the material and immaterial ways through which income is extracted. In the context of accumulation, migration rent enables a focus on how such income is channeled not merely by state actors but also by citizens (who may act as recruiters, sponsors, or intermediaries), private companies, or broader networks. In this instance, migration rent accumulation in emigration rentier contexts is remarkably akin to immigration and refugee rentier ones. Finally, migration rent (re)distribution identifies how such forms of material and immaterial resources may affect fragile domestic political balances—for instance, in terms of supporting "vulnerable" citizens across refugee rentiers or empowering citizens as sponsors across immigration rentiers.

At the same time, our hope is that the POMEPS Study's theoretical discussion on varieties of migration rentierism will serve as a stepping stone for ambitious, cross-disciplinary work on the topic. Our attempt to draw from the empirical richness of the Middle East for theory-building purposes attests to the region's importance and centrality for future academic work. Thus, we encourage scholars to carry our efforts forward in offering a more nuanced view of the political economy of the Middle East, in which cross-border mobility serves a central role—either in historic contexts of colonial and postcolonial politics or in contemporary politics. Importantly, we also hope that the underlying structures that our theoretical framework exposes prove useful to scholars of migration politics in other parts of the world—namely, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, or Asia. Our ambition is that such exercises in joint theorizations of migration politics developed from underexplored areas of the world pave the way for novel understandings of migration politics in which the Middle East, and the wider Global South, enjoy a central position.

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Endnotes

[1] Following the example of early work on the rentier state (see also Lynch and Tsourapas 2024), this line of research has benefited from a value-neutral definition of refugee/immigration rent, and a value-loaded definition of rentierism and rent-seeking.

[2] We acknowledge that a particular state might fit into multiple types, particularly for states that have both high emigration and larger diasporas alongside large numbers of refugees, such as Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, or Yemen. As such, our typology aims to offer an analytical tool to understand the logics and practice of migration rentierism.

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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. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

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