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Echoing and re-echoing refugee policies in the international system: The Lebanese state and its political imaginary

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Abstract

This article sets out to contribute to the debate on how Arab refugee hosting states, generally regarded as norm recipients and recalcitrant implementers of refugee law, have sought to shape, localize, and reconfigure understandings and practices of asylum. More broadly, it also hints at how states draw on the question of asylum to craft "political imaginaries" defined as certain ways of seeing, representing, and enacting the political to entrench power structures and strategies of governance. Drawing on the example of Lebanon, traditionally considered as a peripheral actor in the Euro-Mediterranean migration system, I explore how the small state has recast the understandings of refugee reception and resisted some prescriptions for refugee solutions. In doing so, the Lebanese polity, I argue, has twinned its refugee politics with a broader logic of governmentality vying on sectarian and geopolitical imaginings.

KEYWORDS

Arab states, asylum, Lebanon, norm contestation and localization, Syrian displacement

1 | INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Arab Middle East is host to some of the most protracted refugee situations in the world. Yet, scarce attention has been dedicated to how regional countries have shaped the international refugee regime in light of the fact that countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan,

and Egypt have been key refugee-hosting states (Jones, 2017). Dominant literature has focused on how Western states such as Canada and Australia have affected the international refugee regime's birth and development (Janmyr, 2021). In this setting, Arab states have been depicted as polities that have strayed far from established refugee norms (Zaiotti, 2006). Within this perspective, little emphasis has been placed on how they have grafted codes and practices onto the international refugee regime and how norms originating from their refugee histories have traveled beyond their borders. This is however changing. Recent literature examined how Arab states have disputed and leveraged key notions at the heart of refugee governance (Arar, 2017; Geha & Talhouk, 2019). In particular, scholars have described how Arab states have reappropriated the European Union's (EU) attempts at externalizing migration management (Cassarino, 2020). Drawing on their local traditions, they have also delved into the reasons why countries have been reluctant implementers of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Janmyr, 2017) and of external policy templates (Chatty, 2017).

This article sets out to contribute to the debate on how Arab states, generally regarded as recalcitrant implementers of refugee norms and rule breakers in the international system, have sought to shape the understandings and practices of refuge (Chatty & Fakhoury, 2021). More broadly, it also hints at how states draw on the question of asylum to craft "political imaginaries" (Browne & Diehl, 2019) defined as certain ways of seeing, representing, and enacting the political to entrench power structures and strategies of governance.

Drawing on the example of Lebanon, traditionally considered as a peripheral actor in the Euro-Mediterranean migration system, I explore how the small state has recast the understandings of refugee reception and resisted some prescriptions for refugee solutions. In doing so, the small polity, I argue, has twinned its refugee politics within a broader logic of governmentality vying on sectarian and geopolitical imaginings. These imaginings produce spaces and notions of politics that exclude the "others," mainly seeking to uphold Lebanon's political order (Drew, 2021). In this political order, sectarian powerholders primarily strive to consolidate their sectarian-based and geostrategic interests.

The article is structured as follows. The first part describes how Lebanon has dealt with refugee displacement from Syria. The second part explores how the country has sought to shape and challenge some refugee-related scripts and modes of action. In the third part, I analyze some motives that have propelled Lebanon to engage in such scenarios. The article conveys broader insights into how and why states, which do not necessarily comply with international refugee law, construct styles and imaginaries of governance to shape regimes of displacement in the context of their local imperatives, and amid wider relationalities of power (Fakhoury, 2017).

2 | GOVERNING DISPLACEMENT FROM SYRIA: OPENINGS AND CLOSURES

Since the onset of displacement from Syria, Lebanon has constructed a regime of refugee (im) mobility in which openings and closures alternate and formal policies coexist with informality (Mourad, 2019; Sanyal, 2017). Analyses abound on how Lebanon has opened its borders at the outset of displacement from Syria in 2011 only to close them after it had positioned refugee flight as a key strain (Kikano et al. 2021). Indeed, while Lebanon adopted an incoherent set of border management policies at the beginning, it has sought since 2015 to enforce stricter policies. First, Lebanon closed its borders in the face of incoming Syrians except for humanitarian cases. Second, the Lebanese government instructed the UN Refugee Agency to stop registering

Syrians. Third, Lebanon has been lobbying international circles for prompt refugee return even though the conflict has not abated. In the context of divided ministerial units, municipalities have taken matters in their own hands, enforcing curfews that are not within their mandate. Security forces have increasingly cracked down on Syrian labor, and armed forces have dismantled informal shelters under the pretext of violations and housing regulation infractions. In the name of overstretched capacities and a frail demographical equilibrium imposed by the country's multi-sectarian balance, the small country of Lebanon has increasingly sought to manufacture what Susan Banki (2013) frames as a "precarity of place," making it impossible for displaced individuals to have a physical dwelling.

3 │ RECASTING NOTIONS OF REFUGE

Manufacturing "precarity of place" happens, however, in a broader context in which key governing parties have constructed imaginings that have reframed the conceptions of refugee hospitality as well as contested external proposals for refugee solutions. In what follows, I offer some illustrative examples of how and why the Lebanese polity has done so.

3.1 │ Enacting and spatializing hospitality as a threat

At the outset, Lebanon has been praised for its hospitality. Still, as soon as displacement from Syria became protracted, key governing powers have enacted and performed a series of discursive and geopolitical practices reshaping this narrative (Carpi & Senoguz, 2019). Through such practices, politicians have cast refugee displacement as an existential and spatial crisis. Recurrent elite speech acts have framed Syrian refugee stay on Lebanese soil as a risk to its demographics and economic stability. Still, the political elite have not only constructed Syrian displacement as a menace through discursive practices but also through spatializing refugees as a national threat. Drawing on the historical narrative of militarized Palestinian enclaves, they have banned the construction of official camps (El-Behairy, 2016). This has led to the proliferation of informal settlements and to the production of "non-camp spaces" (Sanyal, 2017) that have stretched into rural and urban cities. This proliferation of informal refugee spaces has legitimated a day-to-day politics of securitization. Security forces have cracked down on the so-called "illegitimate" makeshift settlements as spaces of indiscipline and violation. Non-camp spaces have also allowed for an invasive control of refugee bodies. Municipalities have enforced checkpoints and curfews, constructing a regime of (im)mobility alternating between arbitrary openings and closures (Mourad, 2019). Those governing strategies have performed *hospitality* as a practice that requires constant surveillance stretching into the governance of refugee cartographies and everyday lives. They have also reified a geopolitical logic in which refuge is deeply intertwined with memories of unrest.

3.2 │ Disputing external refugee recipes

> Lebanon is a country of emigration and not a country of settlement, or an open market for labor. (Lebanese President Michel Aoun cited in Haboush, 2018).

Lebanon outsources refugee aid and protection to supranational organizations, namely the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the European Union. Although Lebanon is reliant on external refugee humanitarian aid, some of its key governing powers have engaged over the last years in a feud over the international community's prescriptions for refugee solutions. In the wake of Syrian displacement, actors such as the UNHCR, the World Bank, and the European Union have promoted versions of "resiliency humanitarianism" through which development aid is meant to boost the self-reliance of refugees, equipping them with tools to face adversities (Turner, 2020). By boosting economic development, job creation, and integration into labor markets, resilience-building would simultaneously benefit host and refugee communities (The European Council, 2018). EU tools such as the 2016 Lebanon and Jordan Compacts that channel funding to entice states to host refugees in exchange for improving conditions for integration have become paradigmatic examples of this logic (Fröhlich & Bank, 2021).

Against this backdrop, key Lebanese officials have on various occasions disputed the EU's formula for resilience, diverting rather attention to Lebanon's overstretched capacities, to the incompatibility of the EU's vision with Lebanese circumstances as well as to its limited role in burden-sharing (Fakhoury, 2020b; Haboush, 2018). Reacting to such discourses, the European Union confirmed its intent to continue supporting Lebanon's stability in the face of adversities. Adding to this, Lebanese officials such as President Michel Aoun have persistently called on the European Union to help them secure the return of refugees to the so-called safe areas in Syria, dissociating refugee return from a Syrian settlement (Naharnet, 2019; The Daily Star, 2019). In return, the EU judged return as premature, proposing to boost Lebanon's capacities pending a Syrian peace deal (National News Agency, 2017; The Daily Star, 2019).

Within this climate, soft discursive conflicts on how to steer the refugee policy boat escalated between EU officials and their Lebanese counterparts. In the 2018 Brussels conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, Lebanese officials strongly rebuked the European Union and the United Nations search for more lasting solutions for Syrian refugees on Lebanese soil such as improved integration in the labor market (Naharnet, 2018). Since then, the European Union has had to disprove on various occasions the claim that it is calling for integration on Lebanese soil (Delegation of the European Union, 2019).

Lebanon's governing powers have also attempted to restrict the role of the UNHCR in setting codes of conduct, especially when it comes to prescribing refugee return norms. In 2017, with the Syrian regime regaining ground, and despite the international outcry, the Lebanese government started organizing return trips. That year, in the summer, the UNHCR probed into the conditions under which refugees were set to embark on their return journeys. In a backlash against the UN agency, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil called for freezing the UNHCR officials' residency permits (Geha & Talhouk, 2019). In this polarized context, the UNHCR had to tone down its advocacy rhetoric (Fakhoury, 2020a).

4 | GEOPOLITICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND IMAGINARIES

Needless to say, Lebanon's refugee policy unfolds in a loaded field of power. By recasting hospitality as a risk and contesting prescriptions for refugee stay, the political elite have enacted Lebanon's refugee policy as an assemblage of governing strategies and geopolitical tactics. In this regard, they have embedded representations of asylum within a broader "political imaginary" (Browne & Diehl, 2019) framed here as a set of symbolic practices and ideas seeking to legitimize
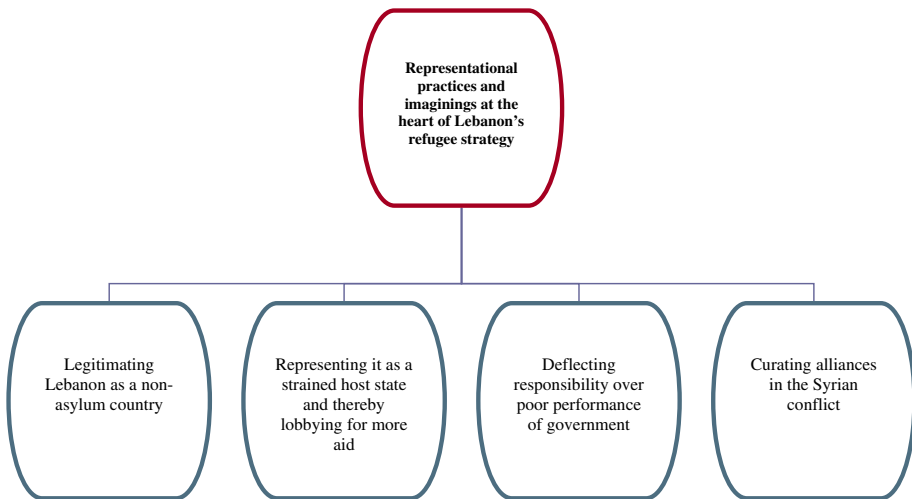
FIGURE 1 Representational practices and imaginings at the heart of Lebanon's refugee strategy

and reproduce ruling class agendas. The following figure captures some of the tactical motives and objectives underlying such refugee representation practices (Figure 1).

Lebanon has historically sought to maintain a geopolitical representation of itself as a non-asylum country. Elite utterances reiterating Lebanon's refusal to integrate displaced Syrians have buttressed this narrative. This narrative has also provided an opportunity to boost parties' electoral and sectarian solidarities. Here, an understanding of Lebanon's legitimation of its refugee politics cannot be divorced from the logic of its sectarian governmentality, and the ways through which governing powers have sought to leverage refugee policy to pursue their hold on power (Fakhoury, 2017; Geha & Talhouk, 2019).

Furthermore, discourses of contention, through which incumbents have questioned prescriptions for refugee solutions reflect a variety of motives (Fakhoury, 2021). By emphasizing local strains and conflating them with the international community's shallow engagement with the country's refugee problems, Lebanese officials sought to lobby for more international aid while deflecting focus from Lebanon's own collapsing governance structures. Similarly, by contesting the argument that returns are premature, some political factions allied with the Bashar al Assad regime endeavored to support the vision of a transitioning Syria ready for reconstruction (Fakhoury, 2020a). Indeed, recent calls for return from Lebanon to Syria have coincided with a series of measures that the Syrian regime has launched, inviting Syrians to come back home. In November 2020, the Syrian regime organized a refugee return conference in Damascus, and Lebanon was one of the few countries to attend the event boycotted by most other countries (Berger & Durgham, 2021).

Lebanon's contentious engagement with external scripts for refugee hosting such as the EU's proposal to facilitate the integration of refugees in host economies has to be situated not only in local fields of power but also in the broader debate on responsibility-sharing versus shifting at the core of the global refugee regime. In this sense, Lebanon's contentious voice mirrors international disputes about the obligations that states have in terms of financially helping refugees or hosting them in their territory. By contesting the EU's refugee solutions for Lebanon or positioning itself as overstretched, the Lebanese state has not however been able to convert its recalcitrant refugee positions into tactical gains. True, the small polity has been able to reap financial

and infrastructural support while implementing restrictive refugee policies at the domestic level. Yet, it has neither been able to negotiate advantageous refugee bargains as the Turkey case shows nor has it been able to push for refugee relocation and resettlement. The country's marginal position as a gatekeeper to the West has made the European Union less sensitive to the incumbents' blackmailing discourse (Tsourapas, 2019). Most importantly, factionalized elites have squabbled over Lebanon's refugee policies, undermining policy coherence. Also, the state's recent collapse caused by decades of corrupt governance has prompted the international community including the European Union to backtrack on cooperation with the ruling class. In the wake of the 2020 Beirut Blasts and in the light of their "deliberate inaction" amid refugees' and citizens' misfortunes (The World Bank, 2021), the same political elite who have contested international refugee solutions have incurred significant costs to their reputation. In this light, they have lost their credibility as interlocutors in matters of governance or in terms of setting standards for what is acceptable refugee treatment.

5 | CONCLUSION

The international refugee regime is commonly framed as the ensemble of rules and decisions governing responses to forced migration. How do various actors enact, develop, imagine, and (re)navigate these rules? And how do states' governing practices weigh in this universe of codified rules? In real-life settings, and far from the veneer of refugee law, states' logics of governmentality, and representations of their own power have, to a large extent, shaped refugee histories and pluralized notions of refuge. Departing from this perspective, the article explored how Lebanon has cast refugee reception as a set of representational practices enacted and reenacted in its contextual strains, logics of socio-political control and political imaginaries. It has shown how Lebanon has performed and spatialized refugee stay as a danger to its sectarian make-up and to its geopolitical representations of "the self" and "others." Contributing to theoretical debates on how refugee practices travel (Janmyr, 2021) and how states embed such practices within a broader imaginary forming and transforming the political (Browne & Diehl, 2019, p. 394), the article analyzed how Lebanon has sought to echo and reecho prescriptions for refugee solutions in the face of its international interlocutors.

Lebanon failed, however, to translate these narratives into policy gains in the international system. Notwithstanding its initial open-border policy and its acknowledged contributions to the global refugee regime, Lebanon's position as an auxiliary state in migration management as well as its rulers' incoherent policies and record of mismanaging funds have limited the country's ability to gain traction as an agenda setter in refugee norms. Lebanon has challenged the UNHCR and the European Union on refugee norms and practices, attracting attention to the quandary of overstretched hosting states and to the importance of global refugee solidarity (Fakhoury, 2020b). Still, the country has neither the geopolitical leverage nor the position in the international ladder of power to project authority. Understanding, however, its role as a policy actor rather than a recipient requires us to shine a light on the relationalities of power driving the global refugee regime. Recently, with displacement from Syria, Arab states have sought to renegotiate the bargain through which the North channels funds to the South to keep refugees at bay in exchange for limited resettlement and financial aid (Arar, 2017). In dominant literature streams, however, states with low capacity to influence refugee regimes are thought to embrace the solutions that more influential states propose including financial aid in return for hosting refugees (Betts & Loescher, 2011). In this light, recent research has increasingly dedicated attention to how states and societies engage in acts of resistance to express discontent with the order of

things (Cassarino, 2020; Chatty, 2017) From this perspective, Lebanon's logic of disputing and recasting codes of refuge gives insights into the intricate logics of displacement governmentalities. Its struggles in echoing and re-echoing refugee practices reflect the very limitations of its age-old sectarian political system. They also conjure the asymmetries upon which the international refugee regime is built.

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