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GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES AND REFUGEE RESPONSE: LEBANON IN THE FACE OF SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT

Abstract

This article discusses how the Lebanese state has responded to displacement from Syria (2011–17), and how the resulting policy formulation processes and discourses have constructed the relationship between the hosting state and the refugee. It focuses especially on how this small state has negotiated its politics of reception and choice of policy tools amid dysfunctional institutions and political disputes. To this end, it uses the lens of Lebanon’s model of sectarian power sharing to understand the polity’s response to mass displacement. This process has been structured by the defining dynamics of the country’s politics of sectarianism: slack governance, an elite fractured model, and a politics of dependence on external and domestic nonstate actors. The Lebanese model offers broader insights into types of coping mechanisms that emerge in the context of forced migration, notably when a formal refugee regime is absent. The article contends that states lacking a legal asylum framework and grappling with various governance hurdles are likely to draw on the repertoire of their political regime to deal with displacement.

Keywords: governance; humanitarianism; policy making; refugees; sectarianism

In view of continuing forced displacement flows from Syria, the theme of refugee sharing has evolved into a highly contentious issue.¹ Syria’s direct neighbors (Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan) and select European states (Germany and Sweden) have adopted a politics of hospitality, albeit in various ways and to various degrees. In contrast, polities such as Hungary and Slovakia have adamantly restricted refugee influx across their borders, exposing the extent to which newcomers strain social cohesion and national resources. Others, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom, have admitted or resettled a limited number of refugees, preferring to donate humanitarian aid to Syria’s bordering countries.²

The debate on “refugee sharing” is not restricted to governments and policy making. Social theorists have been divided over the state’s obligations toward the “Other” and particularly over responsibility sharing in the context of forced displacement. Whereas liberal thinkers have privileged a framework of shared interconnectedness linking individuals beyond the nation-state, communitarians argue that the state ought to prioritize

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its own citizens.³ Garrett Hardin's "lifeboat ethics," a metaphor for resource distribution, suggests that a state should take in refugees insofar as its equilibrium is not disturbed.⁴

In the wake of Syria's crackdown on its 2011 uprising, Lebanon, a multisectarian country of 4.5 million inhabitants, has received more than 1 million Syrian refugees.⁵ Today, the small state hosts more refugees per capita than Jordan and Turkey.⁶ Lebanon's politics of reception has spurred mixed reactions. On the one hand, the international community has praised the country's "generosity" and "resilience."⁷ On the other hand, experts have viewed Lebanon's refugee policy as shortsighted, dubbing it the "policy of the non-policy."⁸ Though Lebanon has opened its borders to displaced Syrians and, by and large, has respected a policy of nonrefoulement,⁹ instruments aiming at refugee governance and protection have been ad hoc.¹⁰

This article discusses the Lebanese state's response to displacement from Syria, and how Lebanon's policy-making frame has constructed the relationship between the host state and the refugee. Against this backdrop, it inquires into the dynamics that have prompted Lebanon to host many Syrian refugees when its own infrastructure, social policies, and management of public goods have been highly dysfunctional.¹¹ I argue that the Lebanese state's response, far from revealing an unusual strategy to an "exceptional" mass influx, has built on its ingrained political repertoire, understood here as the types of interactions, norms, and routines that are inherent to the polity's governance mode.

Although Lebanon has been depicted as an "improbable nation,"¹² it has survived various crises, spurring much literature on its controversial system of sectarian power sharing. The latter devolves power along confessional lines. It requires the formation of a grand coalition government between a Maronite president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shi'i leader of the legislature.¹³ Sects are represented proportionally in the cabinet and parity between Christian and Muslim denominations prevails in the parliament. Since the establishment of the Lebanese state in 1943, rigid sectarian-based quotas have triggered political fears and enticed Lebanese communities to vie for predominance. The overlap between political and sectarian divisions has furthermore prompted Lebanon's elites to outbid each other and nurture external alliances to buttress their position.¹⁴ Historically, the politics of sectarianism has reproduced itself through interest-based and clientelist coalition building at the expense of institutionalized structures. Conceptualized as "hybrid," governance in Lebanon has come to be equated with the grip of nonstate and sectarian parties over the state.¹⁵ In this context, decision making has oftentimes articulated itself through elite bargaining and informal deals. In the face of crises, the system has heightened elite discord, often leading to informal conflict management or political immobilism.¹⁶ In Lebanon's complex web of identity politics, elites have furthermore constructed issues of contention as opportunities for buttressing communal interests.

This article develops a tripartite argument for understanding the nexus between Lebanon's political repertoire and its refugee response. First, Lebanon's strategy toward Syrian mass displacement has replicated the patterns of its own style of governance conceived through the lens of weak institutionalism, competing political strategies, and informal elite transactions. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, policy disputes over the Assad regime's crackdown on its uprising and Lebanon's stance toward the neighboring conflict have weakened the culture of accommodation. Moreover, the political scene has been characterized by elite divisions over electoral timetables and the allocation of political and security offices. An institutional vacuum epitomized by a

dormant parliament and volatile cabinets has prevailed. In the context of power struggles, divergences over Syria's conflict, and worsening security, political discourses have framed the refugee population as a threat on the social, economic, and security levels.

Second, Lebanon has delegated various refugee assistance and protection functions to alternative providers, namely domestic and external nonstate actors. An inquiry into Lebanon's political repertoire reveals that the polity has often eschewed a state-centrist approach to crisis management. Instead, it has relied on arbitrators or external actors to deal with shocks and to defuse crises.¹⁷

Third, though the above-mentioned politics of "outsourcing" has undermined the centrality of state institutions, the Lebanese state—embodied through the prism of its sectarian gatekeepers—has derived benefits from the presence of refugees. In a context of elite squabbling, it has drawn on the card of Syrian displacement as a pretext to justify the institutional vacuum and in some cases as leverage in Lebanon's international relations. Moreover, political groupings organized along sectarian lines have succeeded in utilizing the refugee issue to score political gains. Here it is worth noting that while existing scholarship has conceptualized how Turkey has been leveraging the Syrian refugee crisis,¹⁸ it has not yet explored the Lebanese case in that regard.

The article is structured as follows. I first explore the dynamics that are key to understanding Lebanon's response to Syrian conflict-induced displacement. Then, I contextualize Lebanon's politics of reception within the country's broader repertoire of governance, and inquire into the mechanisms and set of actors that have determined its refugee response. Specifically, I outline the policy tools that the Lebanese state has adopted toward the Syrian refugee population since 2011. Next, I contrast the ad hoc policies that the polity has developed with the securitized rhetoric through which political actors have framed displacement. Subsequently, I explore how the state has delegated various responsibilities to external and domestic nonstate actors and unpack some of the shortcomings of such a politics of "outsourcing." Finally, I look into the political gains that the Lebanese state has derived from the issue of displacement.

Challenging the view that Lebanon's response to forced migration has merely operated in a context of state fragility, the conclusion underlines how this response is embedded within a complex set of political processes. It calls on scholars and practitioners to deepen their empirical understanding of how forced migration from Syria has interacted with Lebanon's politics of sectarianism and to inquire into the polity's "routines of governance" to understand its policy frame incoherence on the one hand, and to generate recommendations for reform on the other. Finally, it should be said that the Lebanese model provides insights relevant to other contexts. Responses to displacement are only partially understood if they are not contextualized within the given state's strategies and characteristics of governance, which articulate themselves beyond institutional and legal arrangements.

CONTEXTUALIZING SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT IN LEBANON

Explaining Lebanon's strategy toward Syria's displacement flows requires a closer look at the country's political patterns and relations with its Syrian neighbor. From the inception of the Lebanese state in 1943, the border between Lebanon and Syria has been ill-defined and porous. Informal traditions of "good neighborliness" and transborder

loyalties have facilitated border crossings and boosted labor migration between the two countries.¹⁹ With the end of Lebanon's 1975–90 Civil War and the adoption of the postwar Ta'if Agreement in 1989, the international community acknowledged Syria as the “guardian” of Lebanon's postwar transition.²⁰ In addition to stationing its military troops in Lebanon until April 2005, Syria negotiated with the Lebanese government a series of bilateral treaties—including the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination—conferring mobility and labor privileges to Syrians in Lebanon.²¹

Over the years, Syria's dominant role in Lebanese politics heightened elite antagonisms. By 2004, political confrontations crystallized into the rise of two contending pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian coalitions, which later came to be dubbed the March 8 and March 14 Alliances. After former prime minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination in February 2005, a largescale protest called for the end of Syrian domination in Lebanon, culminating in the withdrawal of Syrian military troops under US and French pressure. Syria's military withdrawal caused yet another domestic rift. Whereas the pro-Syrian grouping warned of the reemergence of sectarian divisions if Syrian troops were to depart, the anti-Syrian faction saluted the redeployment of the troops as a prospect for democratic revival.²²

Following the departure of Syrian troops, Syrian–Lebanese relations dramatically worsened, resulting in a war of words between Syrian and Lebanese politicians and the return of thousands of Syrian workers to Syria.²³ In 2009, Syria agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Lebanon. Still, the delineation of Syrian–Lebanese territorial borders was not undertaken, raising concerns over territorial encroachments, unregulated border crossings, and weapon flows.²⁴ Political divisions over Syria's role have deepened over time and extended to additional domestic and foreign policy areas. Composed of Sunni and Christian parties and led by the Sunni Future Current, the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance holds friendly stances toward the West and Saudi Arabia. On the domestic front, it is keen on seeing the main Shi'i party—Hizbullah—a key ally of the Syrian regime, demilitarize. The March 8 Alliance, whose key protagonists are the two Shi'i Parties (Amal and Hizbollah) and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), has proven to be more cohesive than its rival. Led by Hizbullah, the Alliance is keen on preserving ties with the Syrian and Iranian regimes. It backs Hizbullah as a necessary deterrent in the face of the threats posed by Israel and radical Islamist networks that have gained power in the wake of Syria's 2011 lethal conflict.

Lebanon's dual balance of power has, over the years, entrenched a politics of immobilism. It has moreover made the tasks of institution building and electoral sequencing amid political feuding almost impossible. In 2007, for instance, an impasse over presidential elections was only resolved thanks to the brokerage of the Qatari government in the framework of the Doha Agreement. Post-2005 elite cartels have been so deeply engaged in squabbling over divisive issues such as electoral laws, the National Defense Strategy, or the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) tasked with trying those responsible for the slaying of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri that they have not seriously engaged in building political structures and social welfare programs. Thus, for example, the state has been unable to pass and audit a draft budget since 2005.²⁵

The 2011 Arab uprisings have seen Lebanon fall deeper into the quagmire of political deadlock. In the intervening five years, two power-sharing cabinets have collapsed. In 2011, the March 8 Alliance used its veto powers to walk out, decrying the Sa'd Hariri

government's funding of the Special Tribunal of Lebanon. Two years later, divisions over security appointments caused the Najib Miqati cabinet to collapse. The subsequent Tammam Salam government (2014–16), which made the Syrian refugee issue a key policy item on its agenda, encouraged negotiation among polarized factions. Still, disagreements over the allocation of military and security positions in addition to a thirty-month impasse over presidential elections have led to a stalemate in the executive.

Although Lebanon has remained fairly unsusceptible to the so-called 2011 Arab Spring, by 2013 the degeneration of the Syrian uprising into a lethal conflict polarized the Lebanese political scene and aggravated security risks. In the northern town of Tripoli, tensions between the pro-Asad 'Alawites and Sunnis who support the Syrian opposition led to an armed conflict. That same year, Hizbullah officially acknowledged its military involvement in Syria, proclaiming the dual objective of backing the Asad regime and repelling radical Islamist forces. Hizbullah's engagement in Syria's war dynamics has inflamed sectarian polarities in Lebanon.²⁶ Given that Hizbullah is part of the Lebanese government, it has also formalized the small polity's active participation in its neighbor's conflict. This has made the policy of disengagement from Syria's conflict—proclaimed in the Baabda Declaration of 2012—ineffective. In August 2014, clashes between Lebanon's army and infiltrated Islamist networks in the northern province of Aarsal highlighted insecurity and fear over conflict diffusion.

In this context, concerns of polarization over Syria's war and elite disagreements over an electoral law have led to the postponement of parliamentary polls since 2013. Compounded by a long period of institutional gridlock, the unparalleled 2015 garbage crisis reflected the state's inability to fulfill one of its core responsibilities: the delivery of basic services. The crisis led masses of people to take to the streets calling for the abdication of government officials and denouncing government corruption.

It is against this backdrop of gridlock, policy disputes, and worsening security that the influx of Syrians across Lebanese borders has taken place. In the next section, I will show that the Lebanese state's response to displacement has replicated the characteristics of its own political repertoire.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN LEBANON'S GOVERNANCE MODE AND RESPONSE TO DISPLACEMENT

Lebanon's legal refugee regime is almost nonexistent. The Lebanese polity does not adhere to the 1951 Geneva Convention. Instead, it relies on a 2003 Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This memorandum confirms that Lebanon is not an asylum country, yet outlines Lebanon's policy of cooperation with the international organization. In 2013, negotiations between the Lebanese government and the UNHCR seeking to harmonize Lebanon's refugee governance system with international law principles have stalled.

In the first few years of the Syrian conflict (2011–13), the Lebanese state maintained an open-border policy, framing Syrians as “displaced people” (*nāziḥīn*) in need of assistance. While 7,200 Syrians were registered with the UNHCR in March 2012,²⁷ by spring 2014 the numbers had exceeded one million.²⁸

To deal with the increasing rate of border crossings, the Lebanese state formulated at the outset a “low-intensity” form of refugee governance. The strategy consisted

of ensuring a politics of collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental agencies so as to manage relief efforts with international donors and regulate Syrian refugees' stay and access to services.²⁹ The Ministry of Social Affairs, whose task is to ensure social cohesion among host and refugee communities, has in the last six years coordinated the relief and assistance programs with the UNHCR and partner nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). At the beginning of the crisis, the High Relief Committee was tasked with coordinating donor aid to facilitate access to food and item services. However, the committee suspended its work on the Syrian refugee file as its secretary general Brahim Bashir was arrested over charges of embezzlement. Managing access to education and health services has been the respective tasks of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Ministry of Public Health. In coordination with the Ministry of Interior, the General Security Office (GSO) has been tasked with border management and the regularization of Syrian refugees' stay through temporary residence permits.

The international community has praised the Lebanese government for enabling refugees to seek private housing and mix with Lebanese communities. The state's refusal to build formal camps, however, does not reflect a refugee inclusion approach. Rather it has an economic and security rationale.³⁰ Except for a few dissident voices, governmental consensus that refugee camps would not be built has prevailed. To legitimize their discourse, political elites cite Lebanon's experience with Palestinian camps and the threat that new refugee camps could turn into conflict enclaves.³¹

Lebanon's policy of nonencampment has, however, contributed to the establishment of 1,900 informal settlements across the country.³² The resulting precarious living conditions experienced by refugees have triggered a political debate as to whether camps could better meet their needs. Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has, for example, called for setting up refugee camps "to help ease the suffering of the huge refugee population."³³

At the outset, Syrians were warmly welcomed in some neighboring villages.³⁴ Political parties such as the Sunni-led Future Current and the Shi'i party Hizbullah emphasized Lebanon's humanitarian duties and exhorted their fellow citizens to consider Syrians as guests in need of hospitality.³⁵ As Syria's conflict dramatically worsened after 2013, however, it became clear that Syrians' return home was not imminent. By then, references to hospitality had largely disappeared from policy and public discourses, replaced by the notion of displacement as a burden.³⁶ This period coincides with exacerbated tensions between refugees and less affluent host communities,³⁷ coupled with the realization that the refugee population had already overstretched the country's capacity.³⁸ Surveys further show that Lebanese citizens have come to perceive Syrian refugee presence as an insecurity factor.³⁹ Cross-border altercations between Syrian militant groups and the Lebanese army have awakened fears of conflict spillovers and refugee militarization.⁴⁰

In October 2014, the Lebanese government adopted a new policy on displacement, enforcing restrictive border controls with a view to curbing the influx of refugees except for humanitarian cases. Lebanon's economic strains and deteriorating security were cited as key drivers of the border enforcement policy.⁴¹ The government also sought to reaffirm Lebanon's sovereign decision making in the face of UNHCR calls for improving refugee protection.⁴² In the 2014 Berlin Conference on the Syrian Refugee Situation, Lebanese officials announced the new policy of border control, affirming that Lebanon was no

asylum country and calling for third countries to resettle a number of Syrian refugees based in Lebanon.⁴³ By May 2015, following the government's request, the UNHCR had suspended refugee registration. Since then the GSO has enforced a multivisa system revolving around the entry categories of "tourist, medical, student, short stay, transit and business."⁴⁴ This system does not envisage any category for flight from conflict and requires complex procedures and documents for registration and renewal of residency permits.⁴⁵ For longer term residence, Syrians who can no longer register with the UNHCR have to find a Lebanese "guarantor" (*kafīl*), who would pledge to sponsor their stay. By January 2015, Syrians who were registered with the UNHCR had to sign a pledge not to work.

In light of several security incidents, such as the 2014 clashes between Islamist factions from Syria and Lebanon's army in the Bekaa Valley, securitized practices have become more widespread.⁴⁶ In border communities, municipal officials have implemented harsher community policing measures, seeking in some cases to restrict Syrians' mobility and gatherings.⁴⁷ In 2016, after the Qaa bombings, which involved militants from Syria blowing themselves up in the northern Lebanese village, the army cracked down on Syrian informal settlements under the suspicion of militarization.

The 2014 policy of border enforcement has had negative reverberations on refugee rights. In the context of an institutional vacuum, it has encouraged discretionary governance measures and increased refugee vulnerability. The GSO has been criticized for its inconsistent application of residency regulations.⁴⁸ Restrictive, tedious, and changing residence procedures have led to "migrant illegality," creating new forms of precariousness.⁴⁹ It has been found that undocumented Syrians are less likely to access services and resort to authorities to redress grievances. A 2015 survey determined, for instance, that only 4 percent of the 1,200 surveyed Syrian respondents have filed a case in the Lebanese court system. Of these, 85 percent admitted to illegal residency status.⁵⁰

Adding to this, ad hoc policies have encouraged the rise of informality. Municipalities across Lebanon have sought to enforce order in their local contexts by imposing arbitrary curfews.⁵¹ Community actors such as "the young guys from the Neighborhood" have informally sought to regulate interactions and disputes between refugee and host communities.⁵² Anecdotal evidence further shows that in the context of limited mobility and contested access to basic services and justice, Syrian refugees have chosen to rely on informal providers rather than state actors.⁵³

While ministries and interministerial cells have continued to coordinate refugee affairs and access to education and healthcare, the state has only superficially integrated the issue of refugee governance into its core power-sharing institutions. Lebanon's parliament, for instance, which has erratically legislated since 2011, has not addressed the issue of Syrian displacement.⁵⁴ By giving a confidence vote to the Tammam Salam government over its 2014 policy statement that prioritizes tackling the Syrian refugee issue, it displaced the matter from the legal to the executive. Notwithstanding its 2014 "Policy on Syrian Displacement," which sought to restrict refugee arrivals, the Council of Ministers has been prevented from taking effective measures in this area by recurring deadlock.⁵⁵ The National Dialogue, a policy platform grouping Lebanon's major sectarian leaders and tasked with processing intractable issues, has only sporadically met since 2011, eschewing the issue of Syrian displacement.

Within this context, two key policy instruments have set the tone for Lebanon's method of refugee governance since 2011. The 2012 Baabda Declaration, which announced Lebanon's intent to dissociate itself from Syria's war, alluded to "humanitarian solidarity" as a right enshrined in the constitution.⁵⁶ Furthermore, since 2015, the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan Document (LCRP) has laid out a road map for coordinating Lebanon's politics of reception with international actors and NGOs. The document stresses a three-pronged strategy aiming at ensuring humanitarian assistance and protection for both Syrian and host populations, strengthening access to basic services, and improving economic and social livelihoods.⁵⁷ Despite its lofty rhetoric, the document is ingrained in a politics of realism. It clearly acknowledges Lebanon's overstretched capabilities and stresses the negative spillovers that have originated from the Syrian conflict. It moreover posits that international funding has targeted Syrians, ignoring vulnerable Lebanese families. In line with the October 2014 Policy on Displacement, it states that repatriation of displaced Syrians is the "preferred durable solution."⁵⁸ The LCRP, then, clearly reveals that the Lebanese state intends to craft crisis management and temporary responses rather than integration strategies.

Indeed, Lebanon's incoherent policy frame over the issue of Syrian displacement has established itself over the years as the desired state of affairs. Behind its façade of incongruity, it reveals a deliberate choice to avoid the adoption of a well-articulated refugee regime.⁵⁹ This has led to a widening gap between international actors' plea for an improved legal framework and the Lebanese state's preferences.⁶⁰

Central to understanding Lebanon's politics of reception is an inquiry into how its political elite and coalitions have contextualized the issue of displacement in the policy frame and within Lebanon's contextual settings. Indeed, since the onset of the Arab uprisings, Lebanon's political groupings rather than its formal political structures have to a great extent determined its governance dynamics.⁶¹ In contrast to Lebanon's loosely articulated refugee regime, elite speech acts over the issue of Syrian displacement have become increasingly securitized.⁶² Political framings have gradually constructed Syrian refugee presence as an economic burden, a threat to Lebanon's balance of power, and a security menace. Concrete arguments employed by the country's major political groupings tend to revolve around the costs that refugees lay on Lebanon's infrastructure and social cohesion, the risk related to tampering with demographics, the fear of resettlement, and the suspicion of refugee militarization.

In addition to warning of the economic consequences of Syrian displacement, key Christian-based political parties, namely the Lebanese Forces, the Kata'ib, and the FPM, have called in the last years for enforcing tighter refugee containment strategies. Former actors in the Lebanese Civil War, the Kata'ib and Lebanese Forces parties are today represented in the Lebanese parliament. Mainly supported by Maronite Christians, they have been key protagonists of the 14 March Alliance since the withdrawal of Syrian troops. For its part, the FPM, which was formally established in 2005 and has grown into the largest Christian Party, has evolved into a major Hizbullah ally and become a central actor in the rival March 8 Alliance. Notwithstanding, the three parties have represented Syrians, who are in majority Sunni Muslims, as a threat to Lebanon's demographics and its national covenant based on an "accommodationist" equilibrium between Christians and Muslims.⁶³

Depicting refugees as a “a threat to the country’s national fabric,” the former leader of the Kata’ib party, Amin Jumayyil, has called for establishing camps at the Lebanese–Syrian border so as to control their “haphazard distribution.”⁶⁴ The leader of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Ja’ja’, has pleaded for the establishment of border camps and has proposed that displaced Syrians who originated from areas that have been liberated by the Syrian opposition return home. He emphasizes the importance of not replicating the experience of the Palestinian refugee militarization in 1975.⁶⁵ The FPM, which has warned against Christian marginalization in Lebanon since the onset of the Arab uprisings and more broadly has cast itself as a defender of Christian minorities in the Middle East, has been particularly vocal about the necessity of Syrians’ rapid repatriation. Its current leader, Jibrān Basil, has repeatedly pointed to the economic, security, and political risks Syrians pose.⁶⁶

The issue of demographics also finds resonance with Lebanon’s Shi’i parties. Hizbulah, for example, has insisted on the principle of refugee hospitality and has carefully avoided “sectarianizing” the refugee issue.⁶⁷ Still, it is wary of a “de facto integration” of “more than a million Sunni refugees” on Lebanese soil.⁶⁸ Given the party’s military involvement in Syria—undertaken with the intent of defending the Assad regime and deterring militant Islamist actors that it dubs as *takfīrīs* (unbelievers)—it has warned that Syrian refugees in Lebanon could be instrumentalized by radical actors.⁶⁹

Even Sunni leaders, who have been most adamant about hospitality, have increasingly warned of the security threats that refugees may present. The 2014 presidential elections in Syria led Lebanon’s former Minister of Interior Nohad Machnouk, member of the Sunni Future Current, to threaten Syrians living in Lebanon that they would be stripped of their “refugee” status if they were to return home to vote. The rationale was fear of friction and politicization.⁷⁰

In the wake of Syria’s precarious ceasefire and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015 that calls for a political settlement in that country, Lebanon’s policy makers have taken up the issue of Syrians’ return more boldly. A policy preference shared by the political elite has been the establishment of safe zones in Syria, a step that would pave the way for Syrian repatriation.⁷¹ As of 2016, political framings representing the Syrian refugee presence as a threat to Lebanon’s power-sharing model and calling for Syrians’ prospective repatriation have taken center stage. In the wake of former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon’s visit to Lebanon, a cascade of political statements rejecting an alleged scheme to naturalize Syrians propagated a politics of fear in the country.⁷² When former French President Francois Hollande visited Lebanon in April 2016, the Maronite League, which groups prominent Maronite Christian figures in the public, private, and religious spheres, addressed a letter to Hollande requesting that France take a stance on the necessary return of Syrians to their country and on establishing safe zones in Syria. The letter of the Maronite League depicts Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon as a factor that could disrupt Lebanon’s postwar political settlement, which rests on a delicate demographic balance between Christians and Muslims.⁷³ After his election to the presidency in October 2016, former FPM leader General Michel A’ūn hurried to emphasize in his inaugural speech the necessity of ensuring the quick return of refugees.⁷⁴

Although this article does not aim at an exhaustive overview of the motives for politicians’ speech acts, it is worth mentioning the extent to which political rhetoric

has amplified the dysfunctional character of Lebanon's refugee response. Securitized discourses have not resulted in generating policy synergies among various political stakeholders. Rather, in the context of Lebanon's "fractured elite model," such discourses have contributed to the cacophony of stances over Syrian refugee presence, leading, as shall be seen, to an instrumentalization of the refugee file. Moreover, they have brought the gap between securitized rhetoric and ineffective governance into stark relief. While policy makers have, for instance, stressed Lebanon's overstretched capabilities and alluded to the rise in unemployment due to the refugee presence,⁷⁵ analysts have decried the Lebanese state's disengagement from infrastructure and social reforms.⁷⁶

LEBANON'S POLITICS OF DELEGATION IN REFUGEE GOVERNANCE

It is within this context that nonstate actors—namely, international organizations, civil society actors, and religious organizations—have partially filled the gaps of Lebanon's precarious system of refugee governance. The Lebanese state has not opposed it. Rather, it has given agency to international and domestic nonstate actors in areas related to refugee livelihoods, relief aid, protection, and empowerment. In 2014, NGOs working on refugee affairs, for instance, reported being able to register and work in Lebanon without hurdles.⁷⁷

In cooperation with the Lebanese government and partner NGOs, the UNHCR has emerged as the key actor in charge of refugee registration (until May 2015) and the provision of assistance and protection. In addition to administering cash grants, providing shelter, and facilitating access to healthcare and education, UNHCR-Lebanon has sought to provide legal aid to refugees and to devise innovative solutions for refugee employment. Other prominent funding actors such as the European Union (EU) and the International Organization of Migration have implemented a large spectrum of projects ranging from providing shelter, food assistance, livelihoods, access to healthcare, education, and social cohesion projects.

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, multiple local nonstate actors have, moreover, assumed a prominent role in refugee relief and livelihoods. Political parties such as Hezbollah have provided housing, food, and medical support to refugees.⁷⁸ Local religious institutions have upheld a politics of humanitarianism through their affiliated agencies, churches, and mosques.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Lebanon's civil society organizations have relied on participative community solutions to mitigate the effects of state disengagement.⁸⁰ The aim has been to defuse tensions between refugee and host communities. It is with this aim that external and local NGOs have privileged joint projects that yield economic and social benefits for both Syrians and Lebanese.⁸¹ Examples vary from job creation schemes to establishing mixed youth community centers. Particularly in overpopulated areas that have sheltered Syrian refugees, the role of local actors—namely, residents and civil society actors—has contributed to social stability.⁸² Local figures who had not traditionally played a role in refugee affairs have assumed new mediatory functions when it comes to redressing refugees' grievances and improving access to services and mobility. One such actor is the neighborhood *mukhtār*, the local official responsible for issuing residence documents.⁸³

On the one hand, the state's policy of delegating refugee management to local and international actors has yielded positive effects in terms of social cohesion. On the other hand, the absence of strong oversight has fostered a receptive environment for uncoordinated refugee strategies. In the longer run, it is not clear whether and to what extent the politics of delegation may backfire on the authority of the Lebanese state.⁸⁴

In theory, Lebanon's LCRP document seeks to coordinate the government's work with international organizations and the civic sphere. However, there has been a prevailing disconnect between the government's response toward the Syrian refugees and the politics of NGOs as the Lebanese government has lacked monitoring capacity over nonstate actors' initiatives.⁸⁵ Doubt hovers over whether it has been able to verify the nonduplication of responses or the geographical outreach of services provided by the NGO sector. Precarious coordination, for instance, between the Ministry of Education, NGOs, and aid organizations has led to duplication and fragmentation.⁸⁶

In view of these weak monitoring and coordination strategies, analysts have been critical of the mushrooming of NGOs and their diverse strategies in refugee affairs. Ethnographic research shows that locals in the northern province of Akkar have questioned whether the proliferation of NGOs is the result of available opportunities for obtaining funding. In this instance, it is also argued that at times NGOs' emphasis on Syrians' humanitarian needs has inflamed tensions either with the host community or with other refugee populations such as the Palestinians.⁸⁷

As a result of ineffective monitoring, uncoordinated and fragmented responses have led in some cases to the instrumentalization of the refugee assistance question, and, as previously underscored, have backfired on refugee rights. While research shows that many religious institutions have practiced refugee assistance beyond sectarian considerations,⁸⁸ Lebanon's political parties, organized along sectarian lines, have chosen in some cases to provide refugee relief to those adhering to their own political orientation. For instance, Sunni parties have been reluctant to help Syrian refugees who are pro-Asad.⁸⁹ In the absence of coherent state directives, the international community has urged the Lebanese state to monitor the decisions of municipalities over curfews imposed on Syrian refugees.⁹⁰

At the heart of Lebanon's politics of delegation is the reliance on international funding to establish refugee relief and protection structures. Donations from international actors such as the EU—which has allocated around 800 million euro in refugee assistance—have been indispensable instruments in reducing the pressure of the refugee presence on the Lebanese state.⁹¹ At the same time, the politics of international funding has had an uneasy relationship with state authority and local capacity building. More specifically, donor aid and its management have revealed several dilemmas when it comes to donor–state and donor–local relationships.

While the international community has pledged to give more funding to Lebanon, it has expressed preferences for injecting money through selected partners rather than governmental institutions. Lebanon's politics of corruption stands out as a primary reason. Though Lebanon has a bad record in funneling foreign aid, it is not clear whether such a strategy could have detrimental effects on the Lebanese state's authority. In general, the relationship between the international donor and the domestic group reinforces local groups' dependency on international bodies. The strategy of allocating funds to selected partners rather than to the government risks downgrading state authority, especially in

the context of postconflict weak states.⁹² Here, it is worth asking whether international actors could have seized this opportunity to impose a politics of accountability on the Lebanese state with the dual aim of spurring institutional reform and mitigating the effects of Syria's displacement.⁹³ A related question is whether Lebanon's dependence on humanitarian funding will entrench state fragility when the international community disengages and donor fatigue sets in.

When it comes to the donor–local group relationship, the multiplicity of funding actors from the West and the Gulf seeking to manage refugee affairs in Lebanon has led to competition and the politicization of donor aid.⁹⁴ It has also been suggested that the prominent role that international organizations have gained in managing displacement have often overshadowed the ownership of community-based organizations over refugee relief processes.⁹⁵

Lebanon's reliance on international funding has further evolved into a site of contestation between the country's political actors. Some have lobbied for more international funding to mitigate the strains related to refugee presence.⁹⁶ Others have been critical of the existing funding's negative implications for Lebanon's host community. Alluding to the precarious conditions of Lebanese farmers in 2012, current FPM leader Jibril Basil blasted the politics of international Syrian refugee relief, as in his view “all the money that goes to the Syrians” would be “detrimental to the Lebanese farmers.”⁹⁷

Against this backdrop, analysts have debated whether and how Lebanon's reliance on multilateral and bilateral financing instruments can serve the dual purpose of alleviating the refugee crisis while consolidating development and local capacity building.⁹⁸ In the framework of the 2016 London Conference for Supporting Syria and the Region—which promises more aid to Lebanon—Lebanese NGOs have recommended that foreign governments recognize the importance of streamlining funding with longer term development strategies.⁹⁹

WHAT GAINS FOR THE “SECTARIAN” STATE?

Rather than a powerless actor, the Lebanese sectarian state, understood here as the assemblage of interest-based political coalitions, has leveraged the issue of Syrian displacement and derived benefits from its loosely articulated refugee response. As underscored before, Lebanon's model of politics rests on the leaders' ability to instrumentalize divisive issues and consolidate sectarian and external loyalties. Such a model interacts uneasily with institutionalism, for the latter requires doing away with clientelist and interest-based networks.

Political elites have drawn on the pretext of the Syrian war and the “displacement crisis” to tone down calls for reform. Security spillovers and the arrival of large numbers of displaced persons have, for instance, provided a rationale for disrupting electoral timetables since 2013. In reality, one of the key reasons for postponing the elections is that divided groupings have not agreed on an electoral law that could accommodate the distribution of power.¹⁰⁰ In the context of a fractured political culture, political parties have moreover taken advantage of the Syrian refugee crisis to consolidate their own status and strategic alliances. Hizbullah, for instance, has branded itself a welfare agent for refugees and host populations.¹⁰¹ At the same time, speculation is rife that the party,

despite its publicly supportive reception of the refugees, has instrumentalized the issue for the purpose of boosting support for its ally, the Asad regime. According to some accounts, during the 2014 presidential elections in Syria, the party pressured Syrian refugees to vote for president Bashar al-Asad.¹⁰² In contrast, anti-Syrian governmental figures have been accused of preventing pro-Asad Syrians from accessing Syria to vote.¹⁰³ Moreover, Christian political parties and figures, who have been extremely vocal about the demographic threat that Syrian refugees pose, have sought to buttress their position as defenders of minorities' and Christians' rights in their communities and in the Middle East.

Amid polarization over the Syrian conflict, actors in the March 14 and March 8 coalitions have drawn on the Syrian refugee presence as a trump card in their political disputes. In 2011, for example, the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance blamed the Miqati government, in which it was not represented, for failing to protect Syrian dissident figures residing in Lebanon.¹⁰⁴ For its part, Hizbullah has pointed to the risk of refugee instrumentalization by militant groups to deflect the criticism from the March 14 Alliance over the party's own military involvement in Syria.¹⁰⁵

The Lebanese state has further drawn on the issue of displacement as a leverage card in the international system. Capitalizing on its position as a state that could "keep migrants away" from the West, it has emerged as a strategic partner for the European Union.¹⁰⁶ Facing an unprecedented movement of refugees to the Continent, the European Union has scaled up its partnership with the small polity in security and migration fields. The Lebanese state has welcomed this cooperation, which promises equipment in return for more vigilant border management.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION: THE BROADER SIGNIFICANCE OF LEBANON'S RESPONSE TO DISPLACEMENT

This article has used the lens of Lebanon's contextual settings and political structures to understand the state's response to mass displacement from Syria. On the one hand, it has shown how political gridlock, divided loyalties over Syria's conflict, and worsening security explain its set of choices, paradoxically both in terms of policy development and policy inaction. On the other hand, it has demonstrated how dynamics characteristic of the Lebanese political repertoire, namely its dysfunctional mode of governance, fractured elite model, and politics of dependence on nonstate entities have been key determinants of Lebanon's coping mechanism.

The article calls for a better understanding of the tangled linkages between Syrian displacement and Lebanon's political model. The refugee population has imposed costs on the host community, yet the politics of sectarianism has extracted gains. In a divided context, elites have instrumentalized the Syrian refugee file for political gains both within Lebanon's domestic politics and the transnational context of Syria's war. The refugee presence has furthermore provided the political establishment with a pretext to downgrade promises of structural reform.

Though the issue of Syrian displacement has been a barometer for Lebanon's governance deficiencies, it could still provide the small state with an opportunity for improving refugee livelihoods and undertaking structural reforms. The Lebanese state can still harness international funding to revitalize its

infrastructure and improve mechanisms for job creation, public goods allocation, and service provision for both refugee and host communities.

From this perspective, Lebanon's coping mechanism with the issue of Syrian displacement emerges as an important lesson for international engagement. It remains to be seen whether the politics of aid donation in a setting where a rights-oriented approach is frail will succeed in alleviating the refugee crisis while providing a model for multilateral refugee governance. In that regard, the article sheds light on the dual risk of entrenching state dependency and indirectly consolidating flawed refugee regimes through the politics of international funding. At the same time, Lebanon's politics of humanitarianism reveals the importance of strengthening the civic sphere and engaging religious actors such as the churches or the mosques in contexts which have resisted integrating a human rights approach into their refugee regimes.

Beyond these questions, the Lebanese example has implications for understanding regional coping mechanisms vis-à-vis forced migration. In the context of states that have not effectively established legal norms for refugee governance, mass displacement responses are bound to be an extension of their governance strategies. Although Lebanon is often considered to be distinctive in its sectarian model of power sharing, it shares various features with surrounding states that have received a significant number of Syrian refugees, namely Jordan and Turkey.¹⁰⁸ In such settings, regional turmoil, authoritarian practices, and ineffective governance have undermined calls for establishing rights-based refugee regimes.¹⁰⁹ An emphasis on their legal and institutional frameworks may very well obscure the complex set of dynamics and constellation of actors that have shaped responses to displacement. Indeed, there is a dearth of attention to understanding how the states' patterns of governance have shaped their refugee systems and how the latter will impact the governance predicament of these states. An inquiry into how "political repertoires" interact with the issue of displacement and how these repertoires are challenged or consolidated by displacement is of major utility to understanding the future transition dynamics of the Middle East.

NOTES

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