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The perils of refugee rentierism in the post-2011 Middle East

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One of the most striking developments in the post-2011 Middle East has been the explicit attempt to employ refugees as instruments of interstate bargaining: from Egypt and North Africa to Turkey and the Levant, Middle East states across the Mediterranean have attempted, in some form or another, to secure material and nonmaterial concessions from the European Union (EU) and its member-states by tying the management of forced migration to their diplomatic issue-linkage strategies. In fact, the multiplicity of formal and informal diplomatic quid pro quos across the region has affected a range of substate and suprastate practices (Jiménez-Alvarez et al., 2021; Lupieri, 2020; Natter, 2021; Saraçoğlu & Bélanger, 2021), and serves as proof to the complex cooperation modalities that have emerged in the Middle East over the last decade.

Political science has approached this set of tactics in a number of ways, most recently examining Western states' "externalization" practices that seek to hold refugees away from their territories (Agnew, 2019), although these accounts do not tend to examine the rationale of Global South states—an argument that may also be raised vis-à-vis scholars examining this issue to identify the inefficiencies of the global refugee regime (Betts, 2017), or the erosion of the distinction between refugees and migrants (Mourad & Norman, 2020). Security scholars have termed the use of refugees in international relations as "demographic bombs," not without criticism (see a critical discussion in Marder, 2018). Aiming to shift focus on the rationale of refugee host states and to draw on non-Western frameworks, this article employs the concept of *refugee rentier states* (Tsourapas, 2019; Freier et al., 2021), namely, refugee host states that seek to secure external economic and political concessions in return for continuing to maintain forcibly displaced communities within their borders.

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Scholars of Middle East politics might not find the use of refugees as instruments of foreign policy particularly novel. Libya's Muammar Gaddafi would often resort to coercion to extract payoffs from target states, be they Arab or European: a year before his death, in the context of a 2010 EU-Africa Summit, he infamously stated that the cost of noncompliance would be that "Europe will turn black." In Jordan, King Abdullah would often quip that the country finds itself between "Iraq and a hard place" (Doucet, 2003), which led to repeated calls for international aid following the 2003 Iraq War, which led to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to seek shelter in Iraq. By 2007, the Jordanian secretary-general of the Interior Ministry, Mukhaymar Abu Jamous, declared that the Iraqis were costing Jordan $1 billion per year; in response, UNHCR afforded $21 million in aid (almost 60% of its operating budget) to the country (Seeley, 2019). Even further back in time, the fate of Palestinian refugees—forcibly displaced from their homeland over successive waves in 1948, 1967, and 1973—has been tied to interstate bargaining (Abu-Odeh, 1999).

Yet, despite similarities with the past, the Arab uprisings also constitute a turning point in the international politics of refugee assistance. This article examines the post-2011 context to identify novel developments across three dimensions: the rationale behind the use of issue-linkage strategies in the global management of forced displacement; the manner through which refugee rentierism is exercised within asymmetric EU-MENA relations; and, finally, the consequences that such arrangements have for politics both within the Middle East and beyond.

The origins of refugee rentierism arguably lie in the set-up of the global refugee regime and, in particular, the evolution of the UNHCR as an institution tasked with the management of forced displacement in ways that would not increase political or economic obligations for United Nations member states (Loescher, 2001). The UNHCR today bears little resemblance to the institution created in the context of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to protect forcibly displaced populations in Europe. The organization's massive expansion during and after the Cold War—not merely geographically, now committed to covering the entire world, as well as organizationally, tasked with helping internally displaced persons—was not accompanied by additional state funding. This led to the UNHCR's gradual weakening as an institution providing support to refugee host states in the Global South—particularly in light of the proliferation of other instruments, or parallel institutions, seeking to manage forced migration at the regional or international level (Betts, 2009). With the burden of managing refugees falling to refugee host states in the non-West, a new "grand bargain" was struck in 2003, aiming to offer payoffs relating to migration for donor states of the Global North and payoffs relating to development for Southern host states. More recently, the international responses to the Syrian refugee crisis and, in particular, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan have put additional emphasis on host-state "resilience" that has accelerated a shift towards refugee rentierism (cf. Arar, 2017; Norman, 2020). Ten years after the Arab uprisings, North–South cooperation on refugee protection shifted away from questions of burden-sharing and human rights protection as, gradually, an economistic lexicon of "bargains," "deals," and "compacts" came to dominate the workings of the global refugee regime until today.

One of the regions in which this novel normative framework of refugee protection was to be tested was the post-2011 Middle East. The Arab uprisings had led not merely to state collapse and civil war across the region—in the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Syria—but to a range of political processes that culminated in the strengthening of the authoritarian rule against political and religious dissent in much of the region. In response, increasing numbers of activists

and their families would now seek asylum in Western states, as the worsening economic climate also contributed to the phenomenon of irregular migration across the Mediterranean. Emerging from a deep economic crisis itself coupled with the rise of far-right and populist politics, the EU was caught unprepared. A "fortress Europe" rationale characterized policy responses by both Brussels and key EU member states.

This set the stage for a confrontation between refugee host states of the first asylum across the Middle East, affected by the worst refugee crisis in recent history, and Europe. Drawing on international relations theory, we can trace refugee rent-seeking behavior across two sets of Middle East states: one group of states engage in *tactical issue-linkage* strategies, which have aimed to add an extra issue of concern—namely, migration—in bargaining negotiations with international donors. In this regard, a key state is Egypt, for example, which enjoys a strategic position in the region, and has received strong attention from EU policymakers in terms of its geopolitical position as a transit state. More broadly, Brussels' multilateral engagement across North Africa and the Middle East has also linked developmental aid with target states' ability and willingness to prevent irregular migration. Separate agreements—in EU terminology, *mobility partnerships*—have been negotiated, and agreed, with a range of other Middle East states, including Morocco and Tunisia.

In recent years, the second group of Middle East states has engaged in *substantive issue-linkage* strategies that seek to alter the perceived relationship between refugee protection and aid in their relations with Western actors. This includes Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey: all three states engaged in direct negotiations with the EU and other international donors, which culminated in three separate agreements in 2016: the Jordan Compact, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, and the EU-Turkey Statement (or "Deal"). In all three cases, as I have described elsewhere, the host states secure substantial economic and political concessions (or, *refugee rent*) in return for continuing to host forcibly displaced populations within their territory: the EU-Turkey Statement included €6 billion worth of economic concessions to Turkey, while the Jordan Compact and the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan included a minimum of $700 million and $400 million, respectively.

This shift towards refugee rentierism has, understandably, polarized stakeholders' assessments of the global protection of refugees. On the one hand, some scholars highlight how North–South cooperation is necessary if we were to restore a functioning global refugee regime. The flow of developmental aid to refugee host states of the first asylum is seen as a necessity in the absence of more durable modes of global burden-sharing mechanisms. With forcibly displaced populations also encouraged to enter the labor market of host states, scholars and—in particular—policymakers see more opportunities to reach a sustainable modus operandi of "win–win–win" approaches that benefit the Global North, the Global South, as well as refugee populations themselves.

Not surprisingly, a range of critical voices has also been raised against refugee rentierism, in addition to longstanding critiques of Global North states' migration externalization processes. I argue that refugee rentier approaches ultimately lead to a process of refugee commodification across three dimensions: in terms of domestic politics, we already witness how a normative encouragement of refugee rentierism on the state level cascades down to the individual- and local-level responses. In Jordan and Lebanon, for instance, we witness the phenomenon of sponsorship, in which Jordanian and Lebanese citizens have been able to sell off "sponsorships" for hundreds of dollars to Syrian refugees aiming to escape encampment. In 2015, a $200 residency fee was introduced in Lebanon for all Syrians over 15 years old, with anyone unable

to pay such an exorbitant fee arrested; in turn, phenomena of bribery have proliferated, as detainees' friends and relatives need to offer money in order have them released.

Beyond domestic politics, refugee rentierism also raises issues in terms of the future of Global North–South cooperation. For one, there is a rise in the instances of the use of migrants and refugees as instruments of coercion from states that seek to overcome asymmetric power relations (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021; Micinski, 2021). Kenya, for instance, has repeatedly threatened to close down the Dadaab camp (hosting over 275,000 refugees) unless it receives more economic aid. Once Turkey felt let down by the post-2016 European economic concessions, it sought to create a second "European refugee crisis" at the land border with Greece in March 2020. A second set of concerns relates to the extent to which Western refugee rent may sustain non-democratic rule across the Global South (Tsourapas, 2021). Negotiations between the EU and Middle East refugee host states have demonstrated how thorny questions regarding the protection of human rights protection or freedom of the press tend to be downplayed in favor of securing the Union's external borders; taking this further, it could be argued that significant portions of this economic aid—which flows directly into government coffers—may, in fact, sustain authoritarianism.

Finally, there is a broader set of questions that relates to how refugee rentierism affects the future of the global refugee regime. One revolves around questions of sustainability: to what extent will Western states continue to economically support refugee host states of the first asylum in the Global South? Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon suggests that they wish to create self-reliant states is not easy to implement. At the same time, we can identify a global diffusion of refugee rent-seeking strategies across the Global South—as African, Latin American, and Asian states seek to secure economic concessions of a level similar to the ones afforded to Eastern Mediterranean states (on this, see Freier et al., 2021).

Overall, this article has taken a sober look at the realities of post-2011 refugee protection across the Middle East, in an effort to understand the workings and implications of the substantive and normative shift towards refugee rentierism. It sought to trace the evolution of refugee rentierism in the context of the weakened post-1951 global refugee regime, which paved the way for the commodification of forced migration in states' international relations. The article offers a sober picture for the future, as it recounts the perils of refugee rentierism across three dimensions—the domestic, the international, and the context of the global refugee regime. Ultimately, it seeks to offer food for thought as we seek to pave the way towards a sustainable future for international cooperation on refugee protection, both within the Middle East and beyond.

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