

# Rentierism in Middle East Migration and Refugee Politics

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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-Qasbiyeh 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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