Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 32, No. 4 © The Author(s) 2018. Published by Oxford University Press.

doi:10.1093/jrs/fey052 Advance Access publication 26 September 2018

From Recipients of Aid to Shapers of Policies: Conceptualizing Government–United Nations Relations during the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

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MS received April 2018; revised MS received August 2018

This article explores the influence of national politics on shaping responses to refugee crises in the Middle East. The article focuses on the case of Lebanon, typically described as a weak or failed state, to explain the progression of policies the Lebanese government used to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. By using qualitative data from interviews with political officials, the article conceptualizes the change in relations between the Lebanese government and United Nations agencies as evidence of a progression in policies by the Lebanese government. Moving from largely a policy of no-policy, as the crisis in Syria turned into a protracted conflict, we depict Lebanon as moving from a mere recipient of aid from the United Nations to a more active player in shaping crisis response policies. The main thrust of this work is to highlight how exogenous shocks can make governments more influential in shaping United Nations agencies.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, United Nations, Lebanon, government, policies

Introduction

Lebanon's geopolitical positioning has made this small country the site of forced migration for many decades. The country now hosts the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide with an estimated 400,000 Palestinians and approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees. But the legal status of refugees in Lebanon is rather precarious as Lebanon, not unlike other Arab states, has not signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. While the literature has sought to address the legal status of refugees in Lebanon (Janmyr 2017), the political dimensions and implications of the Lebanese case remain under-theorized. The political here refers to issues emanating from the sectarian power-sharing

system of governance in Lebanon. Sectarian power-sharing predicates a government based on representation of political elite who often lack consensus over policy issues. The Lebanese state and government are not unified entities and harbour many internal contradictions, and the state has been described historically as weak or fragmented (Pearlman 2014). But the protracted conflict in Syria and its spill-over effects on Lebanon call for a rethinking of the role that the Lebanese government can play in such a crisis. One way of doing so is by conceptualizing the relations between the Lebanese government and United Nations agencies during the Syrian refugee crisis.

We posit that existing literature depicting the Lebanese government as weak presents an inaccurate description given the elaborate mechanisms, both formal and informal, that the government has used to influence United Nations policies and programmes on Syrian refugees. We contend that this influence indicates that the Lebanese government is far from weak and in fact historically, unlike other states in the region, has played an active role in the establishment of the international refugee regime. Recently, the United Nations' Secretary General stated that 'Lebanon is a key pillar in the international framework for the protection of Syrian refugees, and without it, that entire system would collapse' (UN News Report 2014). The main question we seek to address in this article is how the evolution of Lebanon's response to the Syrian crisis influenced the policies and programmes of United Nations agencies. To answer this question, this article highlights the political system and context in which the Lebanese government operates.

By devising and changing its policy stances, the Lebanese government was exerting greater influence over the crisis thereby changing its dynamics with United Nations agencies from a recipient of aid to an actor in shaping policies. This case study shows that, contrary to the prevalent logic of a weak state, the Lebanese government displayed a capacity to step up and to influence United Nations agencies in the wake of crisis. This article aims at explaining with empirical evidence how the Lebanese government managed to allow United Nations agencies to provide aid to Syrian refugees while treating them officially as temporarily displaced migrants (*naziheen*). In answering the question of how the Lebanese governmental policy evolved during the crisis, we seek to contribute to a broader comparative literature on how governments exert influence over refugee policies and programmes in times of crisis. We find that political events nationally, regionally and internationally allowed the Lebanese governmental response to evolve from being mere recipients of aid to a playing a major role in the design of policies to respond to the refugee crisis.

Our data collection took place between November 2017 and March 2018 and covers mainly events and policy changes that took place up to the end of 2016. Theoretically, we posit that the Lebanese state, during the time of this research and data collection, carved out its own policy response to Syrian refugees thereby making United Nations refugee policies secondary to its own agenda during the crisis. From a normative perspective, we recognize that the

Lebanese government's policy stances violated international human rights standards and its overall response was not up to par with the needs of both refugees and host communities. We do however seek in this research to highlight that, despite its flaws, there was indeed a policy response as is evident in the shifting dynamics with United Nations agencies.

This article employs analysis of the relationship between the government and United Nations agencies to add to an emerging literature on the case of Lebanon's response to the Syrian refugee crisis and address specific gaps within the literature. First, we bring empirical evidence that crisis can enable countries with power-sharing systems to exhibit strong influence over policy-making. Second, we explore how the Lebanese government interacted with the United Nations during the Syrian refugee crisis. Third, we illustrate the significant impact of the political contexts and events on the evolution of the government's policy response and position vis-à-vis United Nations agencies and international actors.

This article is based on a qualitative study of semi-structured interviews with 25 senior-level politicians and ministerial representatives. We also conducted focus groups with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with or receiving funds from United Nations agencies to identify changes in field activities. We selected participants in this research based on their role in developing the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)—a strategy and policy document in which the Lebanese government, in collaboration with United Nations agencies, outlined its approach and designed projects to address the Syrian refugee crisis.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we conceptualize Lebanon's political system and present a theoretical background for analysing the Syrian refugee crisis. In the second section, we present our findings on the progression of response to the Syrian refugee crisis highlighting the government's interaction with United Nations agencies between 2012 and 2016. In the final concluding section, we present the theoretical and practical implications of studying government–United Nations relations during a refugee crisis and draw conclusions from the case of Lebanon.

Negating Weakness: A Framework for Lebanon

Lebanon is governed by over a century-old political system of sectarian power-sharing. Despite experiencing break-downs and even a civil war, the political system has been largely intact since Lebanon's independence in 1943 (Hudson 1999). The political system's capacity to survive rests on the willingness and interest of political elite to maintain consensus and divide power among them. This political elite has come to be known as the *zu'ama* (plural) of Lebanon—the handful of political leaders that represent the interests of sectarian communities in Lebanon (Makhoul and Harrison 2004). This sharing of power has turned into dividing benefits and spoils of the state among Lebanon's politicians at the expense of quality state services and sustainable

development (Leenders 2012). To that end, Lebanon's governance system has been fraught with corruption, controlled by sectarian interests and averse to reform. Ministries are divided to guarantee sectarian representation and ministers act more as political mouthpieces to their *za'im* (singular) than as executive public officials. Scholars have focused on Lebanon from the paradigm of a weak state controlled by politicians who use elite bargaining as the main mechanism for developing and agreeing on state policies (Clark and Salloukh 2013).

This section provides a framework for negating weakness in the case of Lebanon by building on existing literature that focuses on the role of local politics in shaping refugee policies. According to Goodwin-Gill (2017), analysis of refugee crises can never be entirely non-political and the protection and repatriation of refugees are highly politicized. Although UNHCR is committed to core protection principles across the world, it often comes into confrontation with the political interests of countries hosting refugees and even with the politics of its own members (Chimni 1998). Relations between host countries and United Nations agencies have been a focus of a growing body of literature, especially after the Cold War (Black 2001). Within this field of study, United Nations agencies have come under scrutiny in cases where basic rights of refugees have been violated such as in Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, amongst others (Salama *et al*. 2004). Most recently, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is reflected in UNHCR's mandate to focus not only on humanitarian relief, but on fostering resilience of refugees and host communities (Pearce and Lee 2018). But, when it comes to the Syrian refugee crisis, little has been done to understand how governments of host countries were able to influence UNHCR's policies.

Recently emerging literature addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon can be broadly categorized into three main streams. The first stream has focused on a language of immobilism and of dysfunctionality of Lebanese governance during the crisis (Fakhoury 2017). Scholars in this stream see the Lebanese state as a failed or weak actor in framing a policy response to the refugee crisis. As such, outsourcing activities and programmes to local government and NGOs is described as an outcome of failed governance as opposed to a purposeful strategy that allowed Lebanon to maintain some form of political stability during the crisis (Atzili 2010). The second stream of literature emerging on the crisis focuses mostly on Lebanon being resilient to the spill-over effects of the crisis in Syria (Salloukh 2017). Scholars here mainly highlight how Lebanon, as a weak state, withstood rising security threats during the Syrian crisis (Hazbun 2016). The third stream of literature takes a sectoral approach to addressing the economic implications of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, urban aspects of the crisis and issues pertaining to the health and livelihoods of refugees (Ammar *et al*. 2016; Buckner *et al*. 2017). Scholars within this stream have focused on the role of civil society

organizations and local communities in providing or obstructing access of refugees to basic rights.

We posit that these existing three streams remain insufficient to explain how Lebanon's response to the Syrian crisis influenced the policies and programmes of United Nations agencies. What is needed to analyse this response is an account of the central role of national politics in allowing the government to design and rapidly change refugee policies on its own territory—a recognition that is widely cited in the literature (Jacobsen 1996). Our analysis is in line with Knudsen's (2017) assertion that the case of the refugee crisis in Lebanon defied the notion of a weak state, facing imminent collapse. Loescher (2001) and others focus on the nexus of interaction between governments and UNHCR, and we situate the example of Lebanon as able to shape policies within this comparative literature. It is not uncommon for host states to have influence in refugee policies, as for example in Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, where changes in the political landscape enabled refugees to return to their countries (Crisp 2001). But this case also reveals how a state, historically theorized as weak, was able to position itself as a shaper of UNHCR's policies. While the Lebanese state and its institutions of legislative, executive and judiciary powers may be subservient to the will of sectarian leaders, they are far from weak.

Having no monopoly over the use of arms, the Lebanese government has been described as lacking sovereignty and authority (Rotberg 2002). According to Cammett (2011), Lebanon's weak state institutions are the reason for widespread loyalty to politicians and sectarian leaders. Nagle (2016) presents a viewpoint of Lebanon as ethnically divided and managed by a weak consociational system. Juxtaposed to the argument of a weak state in Lebanon, there is a burgeoning field of study exploring the continuity and relative stability of its political system. Consensus, off-the-record deal-making and informal institutional mechanisms have become the historical norm in Lebanon and have created strong clientelistic networks and allowed its political system even to survive civil war (Hamzeh 2001).

Socio-economic living conditions in the backdrop of the crisis in Syria had been worsening, especially considering Lebanon's failed post-war reconstruction in the 1990s (Makdisi 2004). The 2006 war with Israel destroyed infrastructure in the southern suburbs of Beirut, which was partially rebuilt through a highly politicized aid campaign (Hamieh and Mac Ginty 2010). The United Nations, through various channels of humanitarian and development intervention, has played a role in trying to support Lebanon's post-war governance through technical assistance to government institutions, peacebuilding in the South of Lebanon, development programmes and service delivery. Home to approximately half a million Palestinian refugees, Lebanon continues to rely almost solely on United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) assistance, education and health programmes to provide aid to Palestinian refugee camps. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Lebanon offers a range of programmes to improve

governance through projects on youth participation, women empowerment and municipal governance.

The opposition-led protest movements that emerged in 2011 in Syria would end in one of the most destructive humanitarian crises in the world. By 2014, Lebanon had around 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees and was crumbling under the weight of the socio-economic and security implications of the crisis in neighbouring Syria. Since the 1975 Lebanese civil war ended in 1989, Syria had become a contentious neighbour. The Ta'if Agreement, which ended the civil war, ushered in three decades of tutelage by the Assad regime over Lebanon's political and security affairs. Divided over the Syrian regime being a friend or foe to Lebanon since 2005 and with the expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanese soil, March 8 (pro-Syrian) and March 14 (anti-Syrian) alliances clashed frequently and led the country into long rounds of political deadlock. Lebanese public institutions after 2005 remained averse to reforms stipulated in the Ta'if Agreement and suffered rampant corruption and low-quality public services.

When Syrians began fleeing to Lebanon, observers and experts expected the worst. The Lebanese government did not enact an encampment policy and instead left settlement and registration to municipalities in already vulnerable and impoverished communities, mainly in the Bekaa and North. Existing theories on this by Turner (2015), among others, posit that the state opted for non-encampment because it lacked capacity to regulate and police potential camps. However, this article contends that the ability of the Lebanese government not to recognize Syrians as refugees and not to enact an encampment policy is not a result of weakness, but a purposeful and practical policy response. Despite a tumultuous political and security situation, there is evidence that subsequent Lebanese governments undertook an active policy response that evolved during the crisis. The United Nations contributed to lauding Lebanon's response as resilient to the extent that it is being hailed as a major international pillar and a model of generous hospitality. The question is how Lebanon managed to not only facilitate the work of United Nations agencies, but also influence policies during the crisis.

A Shift in Policy and Relations between Government and United Nations Agencies

This section presents empirical findings on the progression of response to the Syrian refugee crisis, highlighting the Lebanese government's interaction with United Nations agencies mainly between 2012 and 2016, through three main phases.

Phase One, 2011–14: Deadlock and the Policy of No-policy

The earliest response to the influx of refugees in May 2011 was initially led by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and the Higher Relief Council (HRC),

whereby the former carried out registration and documentation, while HRC offered basic humanitarian assistance. This initial phase was described later by several reports as the phase of the policy of no-policy, with the Lebanese government largely absent from deliberations and regulations on the settlement of refugees. A non-encampment policy meant that refugees were settling informally in the Bekaa and North (Turner 2015). At the time, the Lebanese government headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri had collapsed with the resignation of 11 ministers from the March 8 faction, leaving MoSA as the only functional executive agency overseeing the response for one month before Najib Mikati's government was formed in June 2011. The Mikati government was formed exclusively of March 8 parties and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), considered neutral at the time. The new minister of social affairs, Wael Abu Faour, represented PSP, which had an anti-Syrian regime position. Abu Faour took a leading role in responding to the crisis, insisting on continuing registration activities and coordinating with the HRC to deliver aid.

While the numbers and humanitarian needs of refugees quickly increased, the budget and human resources of MoSA and HRC did not expand. Although MoSA had requested a budget to continue registration activities in October 2011, the Cabinet did not approve the request. One ministry adviser explained that

> the reasoning in 2011 was that MoSA were making a big deal out of the influx of a few thousand refugees, and that this was not even a problem worth considering at that moment. There was an implied accusation that MoSA and the PSP had a plan to consider these Syrians as legal refugees and to eventually naturalise them (Ministry adviser, interview with author, Beirut, 11 December 2017).

The political polarization over the situation in Syria had politicized the discussion over the response to the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, leading to a laissez-faire policy of no-policy. Because political leaders could not informally agree on a position from events within Syria, they also could not form a consensus over the treatment of refugees entering from Syria. A political party representative, recalling early stages of the crisis, said:

> The government did not set up camps. Various MPs from March 14 drafted an appeal to set up safe zones for camps near the border within Lebanon. We followed up on it, but nothing happened (Political party representative, interview with author, Beirut, 11 December 2017).

To explain the lack of response on behalf of the government in the early stages of the crisis, one interview participant argues that

> we also have to remember that during the first year of the revolution or more, Bashar Al Assad denied that protests were happening in Syria, claiming it was all fabricated. How could a Lebanese government formed of pro-Syrian regime

> Ministers come out and say that there are refugees fleeing as a result of the regime's brutal crackdown? (United Nations agency employee, interview with author, Beirut, 17 January 2018).

The Baabda Declaration of June 2012, which announced the government's policy of dissociation from the conflict in Syria, further cemented the government's inaction on the issue of Syrian refugees within Lebanon. The Declaration made by President Michel Suleiman was an outcome of negotiations at the National Dialogue Table where Lebanon was to stand in solidarity with the humanitarian needs of Syrians but remain neutral and disassociate itself politically from the crisis. Within less than a year, however, the Declaration had been breached as Hezbollah, a major party in the Lebanese government, declared that it was actively fighting inside Syria alongside the Assad regime (Hazbun 2016). This was in tandem with the first postponement of Lebanon's parliamentary elections in 2013, followed by a two-year vacuum in the Lebanese presidency (Salloukh 2017).

But deadlock did not stop United Nations agencies from providing basic relief and programming to address the situation of refugees and impoverished host communities. By 2012, around 70 per cent of NGOs from survey data admitted they had shifted their missions to focus on Syrian refugees and that the majority of funding came from foreign donors, indicating increased support for refugee issues, despite the large absence of a formal government policy (European Union 2015). As early as 2013, UNDP had set up a nationwide programme to help municipalities work on social cohesion efforts to help refugees integrate in Lebanese communities. But, when the government made attempts to appeal to the international community in order to equip itself to address the crisis, the result was unfruitful. United Nations agencies and donors exhibited distrust in directly funding ministries to address the refugee crisis and reluctance even to share UNHCR's data on registered refugees (Adviser to Prime Minister's Office, interview with author, Beirut, 6 December 2017). One ministry adviser explained that

> in December 2012, a plan was submitted to donors for programmatic and technical support, without presenting a comprehensive policy. None of the donors showed interest in funding the government. Donors had no trust in the government, especially since the Cabinet was one-sided, and preferred to fund the UN (Ministry adviser, interview with author, Beirut, 11 December 2017).

The Lebanese government's no-policy phase gave the green light for UNHCR to take charge of the design and implementation of humanitarian response. Even during political deadlock, the government outsourced the response to municipalities and NGOs funded by the United Nations and other donors. One ministry adviser explained that 'International organisations filled the vacuum when the government failed to respond to the crisis. If it were not for the UN, where would we be?' (Ministry adviser, interview with author,

Beirut, 1 December 2017). During this period, United Nations agencies were in complete control, with almost no interference from the government. Another ministry adviser recounts that

> UN agencies acted on their own for the most part, and this was after the government gave them room to do so. However, the UN took it overboard. All refugee-related decisions were left to them. When the government had taken a decision against encampment, the UN was pushing more towards permanent structures and settlements (Ministry adviser, interview with author, Beirut, 11 December 2017).

Phase Two, 2014–16: Stepping Up

As the crisis in Syria became a protracted conflict, there was a noticeable shift in the Lebanese government's policy and a visible change in its relations with the United Nations. The government's position started to shift from recipient to an active partner due to a number of political developments locally, regionally and globally. The uprising in Syria took a turn towards a fully fledged war, with the involvement of foreign militias and armies, and the growing influence of armed Islamist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Nusra Front. In Lebanon, the number of Syrian refugees registered or awaiting registration with UNHCR increased by over half a million since 2013, reaching almost 1.2 million by September 2014. A national unity government under Prime Minister Salam was formed in February 2014, represented by ministers from both March 8 and March 14.

The question of the presence of Syrian refugees grew to become a more divisive issue for sectarian communities in Lebanon. The immense increase of refugees took a heavy toll on disenfranchised Sunni communities in areas where Syrians settled in huge numbers, given proximity to the borders and the political safety of being in a Sunni area (typically anti-Assad). While reports mention that Lebanese residents of these areas initially welcomed refugees into their homes, by 2014, the socio-economic burden had begun to cause tensions between the host and refugee populations. Meanwhile, fears were kindled among Christian Lebanese as spokespersons of Christian parties declared that the longer Syrians stayed, the bigger the threat of disrupting sectarian demographics in Lebanon, which would disempower Christians—a fear amalgamated by the history of the involvement of armed Palestinian organizations in the Lebanese civil war. Shiites, on the other hand, considered the majority-Sunni Syrian refugees to be a potential security threat, especially considering Hezbollah's military role alongside the Assad regime. Due to these threats and burdens on sectarian communities, polarization over the conflict within Syria was overpowered by a convergence of interests among politicians to develop a policy towards Syrian refugees within Lebanon. This

was the beginning of a more assertive policy position in which the Lebanese government played a leading role.

Despite convergence of interests on responding to the refugee crisis, this period still witnessed political deadlock on other fundamental issues; parliamentary elections were postponed a second time until 2017 due to disagreement over the electoral law and there was a lack of consensus on electing a president, resulting in a presidential vacuum that lasted for more than two years. The failure to elect a president was met with concern by the international community. The International Support Group for Lebanon (ISGL)—created to support Lebanon's national institutions and army and consists of the United Nations, Arab League, European Union, along with various states—released a statement underlining 'the importance for confidence and stability in avoiding a prolonged vacancy in the presidency' (International Support Group for Lebanon calls for presidential election, *Daily Star*, 2014). But the Lebanese government was still unable to take on a fully fledged leadership role in managing the crisis, although it could no longer neglect the presence of refugees. Thus, the government adjusted its position with respect to the United Nations from observer and recipient to balanced partner with significant negotiating power, which can be traced through a number of policy decisions and major events.

The first official governmental policy on Syrian refugees was the October 2014 policy, which focused on three main headlines: reducing the number of refugees, providing security and alleviating the burden on the host community. The measures to fulfil these objectives included requesting of the UNHCR to stop registering displaced Syrians except after the approval of MoSA and organizing the relationship with international agencies according to Lebanese laws and treaties, which necessitates for the Lebanese government to have access to all information about persons displaced from Syria in order to reduce their numbers in accordance with legal standards and to provide legitimate displaced persons with their needs. The policy also introduced the notion of supporting host communities and pooling funding for government agencies in order to initiate projects for the development of the Lebanese economy.

Shortly after, the General Security Directorate issued a directive to change the regulations for entry and residency of Syrians in Lebanon implemented starting 5 January 2015. These regulations required all Syrians to renew residency permits for a $200 annual fee and provided them with only two options to enter the country: registering with UNHCR and pledging not to work, or finding a Lebanese sponsor. In May of the same year, the Cabinet requested of UNHCR to stop registering refugees from Syria and cancel all registrations since January 2015. One United Nations agency representative stated that

> The UN Headquarters and donors tried to push back against the General Security's decision, but the political pressure was too strong. There were threats

> to cancel the registration of all Syrians since 2011 if we did not comply with this decision (United Nations agency representative, interview with author, Beirut, 21 February 2018).

In parallel to changes within Lebanon, one has also to consider the context of immigration and advent of migrants and refugees to Europe. According to a European Union news report, a record 1.2 million first-time asylum seekers registered in 2015. Fears within Europe of a mass influx of refugees became part of the political debate. While stories of refugees fleeing by sea to the continent's shores and drowning along the way became more common, grassroots movements mobilized to welcome refugees while opposition to new immigrants and refugees grew strong (Ostrand 2015). The European migration crisis served as one major driving factor that enabled the Lebanese government to assume a strong position in negotiating with the international community. An adviser to the Prime Minister's Office put it this way:

> the threat of refugees had become flagrant and therefore the international community believed there was a need to build a shield over Lebanon to pre-empt any deterioration over the security and economic situation, and to prevent deterioration of refugees' situation including humanitarian needs, oppose radicalisation, and prevent Syrians from crossing the Mediterranean and going into Europe.

Recognizing the international interest in stabilizing Lebanon and improving its security and socio-economic conditions, the Lebanese government benefited from the presence of refugees as an opportunity to request further funding. Starting in 2015, the Lebanese government made funding requests for sectors that had been performing weakly and worsened with the presence of Syrians including water, electricity and waste management, indicating an upgrade in the positionality of the government vis-à-vis the presence of refugees. The beginning of 2015 marked the launch of the LCRP, led by the MoSA and co-coordinated by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNDP. The LCRP set up a formal structure of coordination and implementation between government agencies, United Nations agencies, INGOS and local NGOs. Divided into sectoral working groups, task forces and interagency coordination units, the LCRP offers a comprehensive strategy and clear stances on the humanitarian response and stabilization of the situation in Lebanon. The total donor appeal to date is 2.8 billion USD—one of the largest appeals globally. The official position now was to request aid for socio-economic development, job creation and support for Lebanon's infrastructure so that the economy and social fabric would not collapse.

One interview participant explained that, by the end of 2014, there was a decision that 'each ministry should have at least one person hired for the refugee file and strategy' (Ministry staff, interview with author, Beirut, 2 February 2018). These employees were under the payroll of the United

Nations, which had factored institutional and technical assistance to the Lebanese government into its budget. Various ministries began to develop strategies on the response within their sectors, most notably the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). A common point among interview participants was that the MoPH and MEHE were two ministries that successfully designed and implemented a response to the crisis. The MoPH took a decision early on to integrate refugees within the existing health system, which contributed to the resilience of the health-care system as a whole (Ammar *et al*. 2016). In late 2015, a health strategy was released by the MoPH calling upon 'the international community to reconsider its approach towards the relief of the impact of the crisis on Lebanon', stating that 'priorities ought to be set at the government level and calls for funding should be emanating in consultation with UN agencies and NGOs' (Ministry of Public Health 2015). Meanwhile, in 2014, the MEHE launched the three-year Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) programme—a comprehensive plan to provide over 400,000 school-aged Syrian children with learning opportunities in afternoon shifts within Lebanese schools. The RACE programme has received widespread support from the international community and major funding from DFID. The ministry has since launched RACE II (2017–2021), which 'seeks to build on RACE I, envisaging now a more strategic approach to the education sector response, on the premise of a stabilisation and development agenda'. While these ministries may have had different political motivations and approaches, they are clear examples of sectoral governmental agencies beginning to address the refugee crisis head-on.

At the 2016 London Conference for Supporting Syria and the Region, the Lebanese government presented clear and specific policy demands, desired outcomes and budgets per sector, including asking for direct financing of its ministries and municipalities to address the crisis. Formally and officially, Lebanon had not recognized Syrians as refugees and violated its own commitment to withhold military intervention in Syria, and yet it had actively collaborated with the United Nations to develop an elaborate policy approach to handling education, energy, food, protection and health care. With changing political circumstances, European countries and the United Nations now had a vested interested in complying with the Lebanese government's decisions and requests, in order to help Lebanon cope with refugees and deter further resettlement of refugees across Europe.

This period can be characterized as a partnership between United Nations agencies and the Lebanese government, whereby the former previously had a green light to set their own strategy and direct the response to the refugee crisis, and the latter had previously been largely absent. Despite a predominant political stalemate, inability to elect a president and a looming series of security threats, the Lebanese government was able to play an active role in the management of the crisis. Political deadlock did not impede the government's ability to attract funding during this phase and to influence United

Nations agencies to shift from solely addressing refugees to alleviating the burden on host communities.

Phase Three, 2016–present: Government Leadership and United Nations Compliance

Late 2016 witnessed the end of political deadlock in Lebanon. After over two years of presidential vacuum, the Lebanese parliament finally elected Michel Aoun, head of Christian party the Free Patriotic Movement and a Hezbollah ally, as president of the republic. This led to forming a new Cabinet of national unity that was widely acclaimed among global actors as a fundamental step forward for Lebanon. The parliament voted on and ratified a new electoral law based on proportionality in June 2017, extending their term once again but with a clear intention to hold the elections given the widespread agreement on the new electoral system. The international community responded positively; a statement released by the ISGL asserts that

> this as a further step towards the reactivation of Lebanon's institutions of state and the normalisation of Lebanese political life, which will in turn be conducive to addressing pressing concerns of Lebanon's citizens, and to enhanced cooperation with the international community (UN Office of the Special Coordinator for Lebanon, 2017).

Meanwhile, in Syria, the Assad regime and its allies continued to brutally destroy all rebel-held areas to consolidate their power over Syrian territories and, by the end of 2016, all hopes of ending the crisis in Syria were fading. The nature of the conflict in Syria had conclusively been transformed from a revolution to wide-scale war with the interference of regional and global powers like Iran, Turkey, Russia and the United States that unfolded in significant military gains for the pro-Assad powers. In tandem with these developments, at the global-level anti-refugee discourses were increasingly on the rise, with far-right movements emerging across Europe, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Anti-refugee sentiments in the West coupled with internal political consensus enabled the Lebanese government to leverage the presence of refugees and enhance its bargaining power even further.

Amidst these geopolitical changes, there was a shift in the government's discourse on the refugee crisis. One ministry adviser corroborated this shift, saying:

> we definitely cooperate with UN agencies, but we should not compromise our sovereignty in decision-making because they are the ones who are funding. The government should make decisions which the UN and all partners implement in coordination (Ministry adviser, interview with author, 8 December 2017).

This statement is in stark contrast to earlier statements by government officials considering the United Nations to have rescued the situation in

Lebanon during the initial stages of the crisis. This strategic shift is most clearly manifested through the creation of a Ministry of State for the Affairs of the Displaced. This ministry's main role is to develop a strategy for the government's response to the refugee crisis. Under the pretext of developing a clearer policy on refugees, ministries also took on a more assertive role in managing the crisis within their sectors and capitalized on the various funding opportunities to serve their own agendas. A party representative also said: 'the refugee crisis became a business opportunity. The ministries were the first to make use of that business' (Political party representative, interview with author, Beirut, 7 December 2018). Ministries at this stage also made it more difficult for UNHCR to implement projects and taken control of their sectors. 'The Ministry of Education for example would not allow us to take a single step without their approval,' one United Nations agency employee said in disbelief (United Nations agency employee, interview with author, Beirut, 17 January 2018).

The elevation of the government's role in tackling the refugee crisis accompanied crucial security and military developments that also occurred during this time. In July 2017, shortly after the approval of the new electoral law, Hezbollah launched an operation against Jabhat Fatah al-Islam at the Lebanon–Syria border in the North-East, in coordination with the Syrian regime's army. This operation was happening on Lebanese soil without objection from the government, the Lebanese army or even political parties in opposition to Hezbollah. The battle ended in a deal to send 9,000 Syrians, allegedly fighters and their families, away from the border area of Arsal back to Syria, in exchange for eight Hezbollah fighters held by Jabhat Fatah al-Islam ('Thousands to Be Evacuated', *Al Jazeera*, 2017). The United Nations was not involved in this entire operation and, according to an interview with a United Nations agency employee:

> UNHCR was pushing back against the return of those families. However, the agency was not even allowed to contact the Syrians in order to identify which of them were registered and facilitate the process of return. The UN does not consider this incident as *voluntary return* (United Nations agency employee, interview with author, 21 February 2018).

Less than a month after Hezbollah's victory in Arsal, the Lebanese army launched an offensive against ISIS in the North-Eastern border area. On 31 August 2017, President Aoun announced the army's victory in the 'Fajr Al Jouroud' operation against ISIS ('Lebanese Officials Praise Army', *The Daily Star*, 2017). These military operations indicated first that the country was definitely no longer paralysed by deadlock, as Hezbollah waged a battle with no interference or objection from the government, and second that the United Nations was in a weak position and could not intervene to protect the thousands of Syrians who had been sent back. Lebanon had side-lined the United Nations, and Hezbollah had become the main negotiator in the protection of refugees and in waging conflict on the borders of Lebanon and inside Syria.

On 4 November 2017, a few months after the Lebanese state's victory over ISIS and display of strength and unity, the world was shocked by Hariri's sudden resignation, announced from Saudi Arabia and aired through Al-Arabia, a pro-Saudi TV channel. In his resignation speech, Hariri accused Iran of meddling in Lebanon's affairs and planting disorder and destruction in the country. He made references to Hezbollah as Iran's arm, and stated that they have 'managed to impose a fait accompli on Lebanon through the power of its weapons' ('Lebanese PM Saad Hariri Resigns', *Al Jazeera*, 2017). The Lebanese public reacted to the news with outrage; the circumstances under which Hariri announced his resignation were obscure, leading many to believe the prime minister was held by the Saudi Crown Prince and made to resign against his will. At the time of the resignation, Prince Bin Salman was in the midst of a massive crackdown on Saudi royals and businessmen ('How the Saudi Arabia Anti-corruption Crackdown Will Play Out', *The Guardian*, 2017).

Lebanese politicians from across the political spectrum, including President Aoun and Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah, responded by rejecting the resignation, considering it illegitimate unless delivered in person to the president. A few days after the surprise announcement, Foreign Minister Bassil commenced a diplomatic tour among regional and world leaders to demand their support in retrieving Lebanon's prime minister safely, considering the situation a breach of Hariri's political impunity. After negotiations clouded by mystery, French president Macron visited Saudi Arabia and returned to Paris with Hariri. A few days later, Hariri returned to Lebanon and eventually rescinded his resignation on 5 December ('Lebanon's Hariri Rescinds Resignation', *Reuters*, 2017).

Despite the turbulent political atmosphere and security situation, the government has been more brazen in appealing to donors to fund not only humanitarian and stabilization projects, but also development projects that are completely unrelated to the Syrian refugee crisis for infrastructure that has long been in dire conditions. The United Nations, on the other hand, has exhibited compliance with the demands and the approach that the government had been pushing for especially after 2016 and has effectively stopped registering Syrians including new-borns. A United Nations agency employee explained that

> the entire government, from the lower level staff members in municipalities to the ministers, have the ability to stand in the way of our work and stop our projects. They have the political power to push their own agenda (United Nations agency employee, interview with author, Beirut, 21 February 2018).

The interview participant shared experiences of municipalities blackmailing the United Nations to get funding for projects unrelated to refugees:

> sometimes they give the UN a wish-list of projects they want us to fund, and they tell us that if we do not fund them we might wake up to find refugee protection areas burned to the ground by a villager.

In addition to such reported threats, Lebanon's foreign minister and head of the Free Patriotic Movement regularly makes public statements calling for the repatriation of Syrians. Simultaneously, Bassil mentions the importance of receiving funding and support from the international community to maintain Lebanon's stability through statements such as the following:

> The result [of any impact on Lebanon's stability] would be directly on the displaced Syrians, the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the Lebanese, and this would put them in a fragile position that could push them to go to Europe ('No Foreign Interventions', *The Daily Star*, 2017).

Despite Hezbollah's military operations inside and outside Lebanon, the Lebanese government showed consensus over requests for sectoral funding to help in managing the crisis. Three major donor conferences are set to take place in 2018, meant to bolster economic infrastructure and to

> rally international support for Lebanon's security institutions and attract foreign investments to shore up an economy suffering as a result of the everlasting Syrian refugee crisis and ongoing regional turmoil ('Lebanon Seeks $17 Billion', *Annahar*, 2018).

An interview participant described the situation by saying: 'Everyone wants to keep refugees here. If it weren't for the refugees, we would be in deep financial trouble' (Political party representative, interview with author, Beirut, 8 December 2017). This is reflected in the government's relationship with the United Nations as well; as one focus group participant explained:

> UN agencies are now in weak position because they are getting less funding, and because they do not have the backup of embassies and international community since the government can now threaten to open borders and send all refugees to Europe (NGO representative, focus group with author, Beirut, 6 March 2018).

This is reflected in the shift that occurred in the funding priorities by United Nations agencies, moving from relief efforts towards development projects in the Bekaa and North. At the level of the LCRP, one ministry adviser said: 'now we are noticing a boost in funding for sectors related livelihoods, which reflects donors' political interest to keep Syrians settled in Lebanon as opposed to resettling to Europe.' Until the time of writing, this narrative that the Lebanese government now leads the way in handling the plight of Syrian refugees continues.

Conclusion

This article has aimed at answering the question of how the Lebanese governmental response shifted from merely receiving aid while outsourcing responsibilities of assistance to United Nations agencies and NGOs to

actively shaping a policy on the Syrian refugee crisis. The principal burden of this research has been to contribute to negating the conceptualization of Lebanon as a weak state and instead identifying three phases in which the Lebanese government evolved to taking a leading role in influencing and developing policies to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. By doing so, we have sought to contribute to the study of refugee policies by focusing on the relational dynamics between the United Nations and governments.

We draw two main conclusions from this work. First, we build on empirical evidence to argue that small countries may exhibit significant influence over policy responses in times of crisis and exogenous shock. Second, we propose that studying the changing relational dynamics between governments and United Nations agencies can help identify the ways in which governments gain greater leverage and upgrade their positioning even in times of deadlock and political polarization. We propose that future research could embark on a comparative study of how other governments apply pressure to advance their own agendas using refugee crises as opportunities to influence policies and to access more funding. What happened in the Lebanese case legitimized the role of its current post-2016 government despite years of absence in handling the crisis, a history of deficient governance and major human rights violations that refugees face on Lebanese soil. This study can also point to the need for broader research on the politics of refugee aid and on the potential abuses of the roles and mandates of United Nations agencies during crisis. The Lebanese case study here may serve beyond theory as a practical cautionary tale for similar comparable situations of forced migration.

Acknowledgements

This research project was funded by the University Research Board of the American University of Beirut. The authors wish to thank participants who agreed to take part in this research; we hope to have relayed as accurately and ethically their experiences and sentiments about this topic.

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