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Research Article

When Do States Repatriate Refugees? Evidence from the Middle East

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Abstract

Which conditions affect whether a state will choose to repatriate forcibly displaced populations residing within its borders? One of the most pressing issues related to the protracted Syrian refugee situation concerns the future of over 5 million Syrians who sought shelter in neighboring states. With host countries pursuing disparate strategies on Syrians' return, the existing literature has yet to provide a framework that is able to account for variation on host states' policies toward refugee repatriation. In this paper, we expand upon the concept of the *refugee rentier state* to theorize inductively upon the conditions shaping states' policymaking on repatriation. We draw upon multi-sited fieldwork across the three major refugee host states in the Eastern Mediterranean (Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) to establish that a refugee rentier state's strategy is driven by domestic political economy costs related to the hosting of refugee populations as well as its geostrategic interests vis-à-vis these refugees' country of origin. Using a comparative case study approach, we note how a state is more likely to pursue a *blackmailing* strategy based on threats if it faces high domestic political economy costs and adopts an interventionist policy vis-à-vis the sending state, as in the case of Turkey. Otherwise, it is more likely to pursue a *backscratching* strategy based on bargains, as in the case of Lebanon and Jordan. We conclude with a discussion on how this framework sheds light on refugee host states' repatriation policies on a global scale.

Résumé

Quelles conditions poussent un État à choisir de rapatrier des populations déplacées par la force à l'intérieur de ses frontières? L"une des problématiques les plus pressantes liée à la situation des réfugiés syriens de longue durée concerne l'avenir de plus de 5 millions de Syriens qui se sont réfugiés dans les États voisins. Les États hôte poursuivant diverses stratégies pour le retour des Syriens, la littérature actuelle devrait fournir un cadre pour faire état des différences de politiques des États hôte concernant le rapatriement des réfugiés. Dans le présent article, nous développons le concept d'État rentier de réfugiés pour théoriser de façon inductive les conditions modelant la prise de décisions de rapatriement des États. Nous nous basons sur un travail de terrain réparti sur plusieurs sites des trois principaux États hôtes de réfugiés en Méditerranée orientale (Jordanie, Liban et Turquie) pour déterminer que la stratégie d"un État rentier de réfugiés est motivée par les coûts économiques et politiques relatifs à l'accueil des populations réfugiées, mais aussi par ses intérêts géostratégiques par rapport au pays d"origine de ces réfugiés. À l'aide d"une approche d'étude de cas comparative, nous remarquons qu'un État a plus de chances de poursuivre une stratégie de chantage basée sur les menaces s'il est confronté à des coûts politiques et économiques élevés et s'il adopte une politique interventionniste vis-à-vis de l'État émetteur, comme en Turquie. Sinon, il a plus de chance d'adopter une stratégie de flatterie basée sur des accords, comme au Liban ou en Jordanie. Nous concluons

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notre propos par un débat sur la mise en lumière par ce cadre des politiques de rapatriement des États hôte de réfugiés à l'échelle mondiale.

Resumen

¿Qué condiciones influyen en que un Estado decida repatriar a las poblaciones desplazadas por la fuerza que residen dentro de sus fronteras? Una de las cuestiones más apremiantes, relacionada con la prolongada situación de los refugiados sirios, se refiere al futuro de más de 5 millones de sirios que buscaron refugio en los estados vecinos. Dado que los países de acogida persiguen estrategias dispares en relación con el retorno de los sirios, la literatura existente aún no ha proporcionado un marco capaz de explicar la variación de las políticas de los Estados de acogida en relación con la repatriación de los refugiados. En este artículo, ampliamos el concepto de Estado rentista en materia de refugiados para teorizar de forma inductiva sobre las condiciones que conforman la formulación de políticas de los Estados en materia de repatriación. Nos basamos en un trabajo de campo multicéntrico en los tres principales Estados de acogida de refugiados en el Mediterráneo Oriental (Jordania, Líbano y Turquía) para demostrar que la estrategia de un Estado rentista en materia de refugiados está impulsada por los costes de la economía política nacional relacionados con la acogida de poblaciones de refugiados, así como por sus intereses geoestratégicos con respecto al país de origen de estos refugiados. Utilizando un enfoque de estudio comparativo de casos, observamos cómo es más probable que un Estado siga una estrategia de chantaje basada en amenazas si se enfrenta a costes elevados en materia de economía política interna y adopta una política intervencionista frente al Estado causante, como en el caso de Turquía. De lo contrario, es más probable que persiga una estrategia de «pasarse la pelota» basada en negociaciones, como en el caso del Líbano y Jordania. Concluimos con un debate sobre cómo este marco arroja luz sobre las políticas de repatriación de los Estados de acogida de refugiados a escala mundial.

Keywords: refugees, Middle East, migration, Global South
Palabras clave: réfugiés, moyen-orient, émigration, hémisphère sud
Mots clés: refugiados, oriente medio, migración, sur global

Introduction

For over a decade now, the international community has sought to address the issue of Syrian forced migration as it emerged out of the context of the country's post-2011 civil war. With more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees scattered across the Middle East and beyond, matters related to the settlement of Syrians outside the borders of their home country have attracted significant attention by academics and policymakers alike. One salient security issue that has yet to become the focus of scholarly attention is the management of refugees' return, or their repatriation, to Syria.[1] While host states habitually approach mass and protracted refugee situations as a national security issue, these are also a matter of human security: refugees who are coerced into returning to countries of origin typically lack protection against violence or discrimination. At the same time, returnees encounter severe challenges in rebuilding their lives and accessing rights due to socioeconomic, political, and security uncertainties.[2] Still, host states regard forced migrants' repatriation as a highly desirable option and implement a range of policies aimed at supporting refugee return, often with the support of the international community. Yet, academic work on the matter continues to be relatively scattered: within the subfield of the international politics of migration, there is little agreement on the conditions that affect host states' attitudes toward refugee return. What is the range of foreign policy strategies available to refugee host states involved in repatriation? Which conditions determine their

1 For ease of writing, the concepts of return and repatriation are employed interchangeably. Similarly, we use the terms Syrian refugees or forcibly displaced persons to refer to Syrian citizens that have left the country in pursuit of asylum abroad.

2 For a broader discussion on this, see Hammerstad (2000), Adelman (2001), and Crisp and Long (2016).

policies on the return of forcibly displaced populations residing within their borders?

In this article, we build on the emerging literature on *refugee rentier states*, namely host states seeking to "extract revenue from other state or nonstate actors for maintaining refugee groups within their borders" (Tsourapas 2019, 465). We employ a neorealist take on the international politics of migration management to confirm the expectations of this evolving research agenda on refugee diplomacy that identifies the centrality of domestic and geostrategic calculations shaping host states' policymaking (cf. Mencütek 2018; Anholt 2020; Müller-Funk, Fröhlich, and Bank 2020). We pay attention to the important component of repatriation in refugee rent-seeking strategies, and we inductively argue that refugee rentier states may pursue either a *backscratching* or *blackmailing* approach in their foreign policymaking based on bargains or threats, respectively. On the one hand, a blackmailing strategy threatens unilateral action on returning refugees to their home country, unless compensated. On the other hand, a backscratching strategy promises to abstain from unilateral action on returning refugees to their home country, if compensated. We expect that a state is more likely to pursue a blackmailing strategy based on threats if it faces high domestic political economy costs and pursues an interventionist policy vis-à-vis refugees' country of origin. Otherwise, it is more likely to adopt a backscratching strategy based on bargains.

We examine three main refugee rentier states in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis across the Middle East—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Drawing on data collected across the three countries, we employ a comparative case study approach for the purposes of theory development via covariation and process tracing. These countries, which cumulatively host the largest numbers of forcibly displaced Syrians in the region, exhibit significant policy variation on the question of repatriation. On the one hand, Jordan and Lebanon largely pursue a foreign policy strategy of backscratching based on bargaining and close cooperation with the international community. This is arguably explained by the absence of an interventionist policy vis-à-vis the Syrian regime and the presence of material compensation, via the influx of foreign aid that alleviates the domestic political economy cost of Syrian refugees across the two countries. On the other hand, Turkey developed a blackmailing approach that relies on threats and unilateral action. To account for the development of this approach, we examine the government's revisionist policy toward Syria as well as domestic stakeholders' pursuit of additional compensation, noting the widespread belief that foreign aid has not adequately addressed Turkey's domestic political economy cost of hosting Syrian refugees. Overall, by basing our analysis on the refugee rentier state model's expectation that host states use blackmailing and backscratching to extract value from displacement, this article develops this framework further via specific reference to the context of repatriation.

Our article is structured as follows: initially, we review the relevant literature and present our theoretical model and expectations. We proceed to introduce the three cases and pay particular attention to the evolution of their respective policies on the question of refugee repatriation. Drawing on extensive fieldwork across the three countries, we identify the importance of domestic and foreign policy factors in shaping elites' strategies toward refugee repatriation. We examine how the refugee rentier state framework can explain differences in the three countries' approaches, while we also discount alternative explanations that may be proposed. Finally, we examine how the article's framework can explain refugee host states' policymaking on return across the broader Middle East and the Global South, paving the way for ambitious future large-N work on repatriation. Moving beyond questions of return, we conclude with a note on how the framework of refugee rentierism may shed light on a broader range of host states' domestic and foreign policymaking.

Investigating the Politics of Repatriation in Forced Migration Management

The literature on forced migration has witnessed a remarkable surge in scholarly interest, arguably at least partially driven by multiple post-2011 refugee "crises" (Betts 2021; Hamlin 2021; more broadly, see: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). A range of recent international relations and security studies works on the topic have focused primarily on the causes and drivers of forced migration (Ozaltin, Shakir, and Loizides 2020; Kolbe 2021), the effects of forced migration on host states of first asylum (Baylouny 2020; Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein 2022), European attempts at externalization and securitization (Jaulin et al. 2020; Léonard and Kaunert 2022), as well as the challenges faced by the global refugee regime (Lori and Schilde 2021; Micinski 2021). Work that examines migration politics via Southern or global perspectives has also become more prominent in recent years (Gazzoti et al. 2022; Hollifield and Foley 2022; Natter and Thiollet 2022). Drawing inspiration from the emerging research agenda of migration diplomacy (İçduygu and Aksel 2014; Tsourapas 2017), several scholars delve into the foreign and security policy dimension of migration and refugee management (Müftüler-Baç 2020;

Crawley 2021; Geddes and Maru 2021; Laube 2021; Fernández-Molina and Hernando De Larramendi 2022).

Within this line of research, the international politics of refugee return remain undertheorized even though the regulation of repatriation return remains a vital component of contemporary "migration management governance" (Chimni 1993, 2004; Peutz and De Genova 2010; Rosenberger and Koppes 2018). "Voluntary" repatriation—namely, the return of persons to their country of origin based on freely expressed willingness to return (IOM 2011)—has long been presented as a durable solution for refugees, along with local integration and third-country resettlement. Repatriation has become the most desirable policy option for the host states and the international community (van Houte and Davids 2014, 74; Koch 2014), with the latter being concerned about the high cost of permanent protection and integration as well as the limited resettlement options in third countries. However, interstate discussions on repatriation policy remain a "highly politically charged process" (Black and Gent 2006, 15). In fact, negotiations around refugee host states' repatriation policies create distinct tensions across both states' domestic political actors and states' international relations (Fakhoury 2020a; Abdelaaty 2021), in ways that have yet to be theorized.

Despite early attempts to understand how return features into the development of the global refugee regime (Chimni 1993; 2004), the literature remains relatively fragmented, with the majority of works focusing on single-case study analyses.[3] A range of insights have been put forth, highlighting how refugee return might be instrumentalized by actors within host states' domestic politics (Fakhoury 2020a; Mielke 2022), how host states may eschew formal policymaking on repatriation (Morris 2019), or how questions of refugee return might serve as the basis of issue-linkage strategies or geopolitics (Mencütek 2021, 2022; cf. Tsourapas 2017). At the same time, scholars recognize that repatriation policies rely on interstate negotiations while also being affected by ongoing processes of conflict resolution and state-building (Williams and Zeager 2004; Milner 2009; Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak 2019; Sundaram 2021).

One way forward has been the examination of *refugee rentier states*, namely states that employ their geopolitical position as leverage to extract revenue from other states in exchange for maintaining refugees within their borders, via *backscratching* strategies that support multilateral efforts and unilateral, *blackmailing* approaches (Tsourapas 2019). Recent literature has unpacked how states across the Global South seek to instrumentalize forced migration in ways that befit their domestic and/or foreign policy goals (Micinski 2018; Tennis 2020; Cham and Adam 2021), particularly in the Middle East (Norman 2020; Ceccorulli 2021; Buehler et al. 2022), but also Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia (Freier et al. 2021; Mielke 2022; Paliwal 2022). Drawing on neorealist approaches to international relations, this line of work highlights how domestic and geopolitical calculations drive decision-making processes across refugee host states in their negotiations with international donors. To what extent would the return of refugee populations, another key process in which international donors remain involved, be driven by a similar rationale?[4] This paper seeks to understand this inductively within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis and host-state policymaking across the Eastern Mediterranean.

Methodology and Scope Conditions

We employ case-study methodology aiming to inductively develop a theory of states' determinants of return via the use of process tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2013). We seek to establish the study's theoretical claims via covariation, using within-case analysis to identify the causal claims and mechanisms outlined above—the importance of domestic political economy costs and foreign policy factors in determining a refugee host states' position vis-à-vis the return of forced migrants. The three cases under study—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—were selected due to their status as hosting the largest numbers of Syrian refugees in the region (Mencütek 2018; Tsourapas 2019). Turkey hosts some 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees, while Jordan and Lebanon are estimated to host between 660,000 to 1.26 million and 1 to 2.2 million Syrian refugees, respectively. We engaged in data collection for this study via fieldwork across all three states, also drawing on Arabic, Turkish, and English material that

3 İçduygu and Nimer (2020) provide a notable exception by focusing on how public opinion influences refugee return policymaking across Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

4 In her analysis of engineered migration and refugee crises, Greenhill speaks of Western states being affected by "hypocricy costs," namely "symbolic political costs that arise when there exists a real (or perceived) disparity between a professed commitment to liberal values and/or international norms and demonstrated actions that contravene such a commitment" (Greenhill 2010, 94). We expect that refugee rentier states' blackmailing and/or backscratching approaches to refugee repatriation seek to publicly shame Western liberal states via such hypocrisy costs by associating their policies with illegal and inhumane forced returns.

include media reports, policy papers, and briefs. We conducted elite and expert interviews of refugee host state officials, aid workers, as well as high-ranking policy experts within international organizations and nongovernmental organizations working with Syrian refugees via repeated fieldwork activity between 2016 and 2021 across all three states.

It is important to note that discussions on refugee integration and resettlement fall beyond the scope of this paper, as our focus centers on state policies regarding repatriation, voluntary or otherwise. The distinction between the two is blurry: significant evidence suggests that the "voluntary" nature of returns is misunderstood, especially as the criteria for secure, safe, and dignified return are not always fulfilled. Refugees' aspirations regarding return are also not always considered in host states' policymaking (Kayaoğlu *et al*. 2021). In addition, returnees face three major challenges: the lack of security and safety; the humanitarian and socio-economic situation at home threatening the survival of returnees; and, finally, serious problems about accessing housing, land, and property rights (Mencütek 2022a). Within the context of the Syrian civil war, there are documented cases of returnees facing conscription into the army, detention, disappearance, torture, extra-judicial killings, inhuman and degrading treatment by security officials of the government or armed groups, and dire living conditions (Valenta et al. 2020; Amnesty International 2021). In view of such issues, we argue that it is impossible to accurately identify Syrians' voluntary and informed return. Rather, we understand voluntary repatriation mainly as a policy category utilized by host states.

It should also be noted that numbers of refugees and returnees, and statistics on the budgetary costs of hosting refugees, are typically contentious and politicized issues within host states, for a number of reasons (Crisp 2022; on the Syrian case, see Tsourapas 2019, 469). There are also many unregistered refugees staying in, migrating onward, or returning from these countries. In the Jordanian case, there are only partial estimates on per refugee budgetary costs in relation to macroeconomic programs. Overall, there is a lack of verifiable, reliable, and comparable estimates or proxies about the financial cost of refugees across the three host countries under examination from 2012 until today. For the purposes of this analysis, estimates of refugee spending costs borne by each host state are either fully absent, as in Lebanon's case, or they are based on figures taken from speeches made by political leaders, as in the case of Turkey. Therefore, our account of political economy costs necessarily refers to the perceived "cost" of hosting refugees, as narrated by political elites in each refugee rentier state.

The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Repatriation in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey

Jordan

As a main host state of forcibly displaced populations in the Middle East since the late 1940s, the Jordanian state's policies toward refugee protection has been well-studied, including work in history (Plascov 1981; Robins 2019), political economy (Reiter 2004; El Dardiry 2017), demography (Fargues 2013; De Bel-Air 2016), anthropology and sociology (Chatelard 2010; Achilli 2015), and political science (Betts, Ali, and Memişoğlu 2017; Mencütek 2018; Frost 2020). In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, Jordanian policy responses coincided with several international developments. For one, the 2015 European refugee crisis shifted global attention to Jordan, leading to the acceleration of a range of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including multiple Brussels Conferences in support of Syrians across the broader region. The pro-refugee international sentiment of the time also contributed to a peak in resettlement spaces for Syrians by the United States and Canada in 2016 (Schneider 2020). That said, Jordanian security concerns have also impacted upon the country's approach toward forcibly displaced populations. The US-led "Deal of the Century," for instance, sparked fears across Jordanian elites of greater numbers of Palestinian refugees, in particular, seeking protection into the Kingdom, who would risk "upsetting the country's demographic balance and ultimately turning it into a Palestinian state" (Sawalha 2020).[5]

The Jordanian state has generally discouraged Syrian refugees' repatriation, at least publicly, and has sought to cooperate with the international community on the matter.[6] Unlike other host states of Syrian refugees, Jordan does not allow "go-and-see" visits to Syrians living within its territory, nor does the UNHCR have any infrastructure that would allow for such opportunities (Morris 2019).[7] Jordanian policy of *backscratching* can be explained based on the domestic political economy

5 For a comprehensive examination on the complicated relationship between the Jordanian state and Palestinian refugees, see work by Frost (2022).

6 That said, Human Rights Watch has documented a number of unlawful forced repatriations taking place in Jordan (HRW 2017). We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important point.

7 "Go-and-see" visits occur in Turkey and Iraq. They allow Syrians to cross the border (with an official permit valid for up to four months during the religious festive times in Turkey, and without any permit in Iraq) and then re-renter the country without losing the protection

priorities and the country's foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis Syria. Domestically, Jordan has traditionally received international economic support in exchange for its hosting of refugee communities from 1948 onward, eventually evolving into an archetypical refugee rentier state (Tsourapas 2019). In fact, the country has one of the highest ratios of refugees to host population worldwide, something "that the Jordanian authorities frequently stress, if only to spur donor countries to keep funding" going (Chatelard 2010; cf. Lenner and Turner 2019).

Jordanian elites, including King Abdullah, would repeatedly stress the country's collaborative approach to refugee hosting, although moments of tensions also existed: "I think it's gotten to a boiling point . . . sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," King Abdullah warned in 2016, stating that "we can't do it anymore" (BBC 2016). Yet, beyond such rhetoric, existing research on Jordanian policymakers' migration diplomacy suggests that a *blackmailing* approach was never seriously considered given the structural constraints that the Jordanian state faces if it was to potentially engage in unilateral actions against Western states (Arar 2017; Tsourapas 2019). Not surprisingly, in the context of Syrian refugees, Jordan pursued a resilience-based agenda focused on the economic and development challenges of forced displacement (Turner 2015), placed in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis and European attempts to manage this. Jordan's agenda developed into the bi-yearly Jordan Response Plans from 2015 onward, which shift focus from short-term emergency and humanitarian aid to long-term collaborative development. Signed with the EU, the 2016 Jordan Compact epitomizes this approach and serves as a key document on Syrian refugees in Jordan. The Compact was followed by the 2019 London Initiative, led by the United Kingdom and Jordan, aiming to "unlock growth, jobs and investment" (Jordan Times 2019).

Considering this fact, Jordanian policymakers and officials have argued that the main reason why Jordan has chosen to closely cooperate with the international community on matters of Syrians' repatriation is linked to compensation: the absence of any unilateral action on the matter is due to the immense foreign financial aid that the country receives, which has been increasingly linked to Syrian refugees' integration in Jordan. Since 2016, Jordan has received nearly $2 billion from the United States alone in humanitarian aid (CRS 2022, 20) and has led the way in terms of integrating Syrian refugees into its economy. Overall, the backscratching strategy that the Jordanian refugee rentier state has adopted is linked to the importance of continuing flows of external aid or refugee rent.

At the same time, the Jordanian state is reluctant to shift away from a backscratching strategy of cooperation due to the nature of the Jordan's geopolitical interests in the region. For one, bilateral relations between Syria and Jordan ebbed and flowed over the last few decades, although they had warmed up in the years prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. In the post-2011 era, Jordan has sought to minimize any spillovers into its territory and has placed its support firmly behind the American-led support of Syrian rebels and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), although the country has also coordinated with Russia. As of mid-2021, Jordan pursues normalization with Syrian government, starting with diplomatic gestures like opening the border crossings (Matthews 2021). Finally, the country's securitization priorities continue to impact upon the country's relations with European partners: this is particularly true regarding the construction of a Mediterranean security community via institutional initiatives in which Jordan is a key partner, such as the Union for the Mediterranean and the bilateral Mobility Partnership (Seeberg 2016).

Turkey

As of June 2021, Turkey hosts over 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection status that builds on the principle of *non-refoulment*, and the provision of registration, social assistance, education, and health services (DGMM 2021). Since Syrian refugees' first arrival in mid-2011, the Turkish government, led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), envisaged their eventual repatriation by offering only temporary protection rather than permanent status. The 2013 National Asylum Law and the 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation corroborate this view, for they accorded the Turkish presidency full authority to determine the length of this temporary protection without clarifying the conditions necessary for repatriation. Syrians' return has been on the government's agenda since 2015–2016, in parallel to transformations in domestic and geopolitical dynamics, as will be explained below. Moreover, the 2015 European refugee crisis enabled the Turkish government to confidently use the hosting of Syrian refugees as an instrument in political and financial bargaining, frequently involving potential unilateral actions. The instrumentalization of Syrian refugees is evident in two sets of threats: first, pushing migrants toward the European borders; and, second, repatriating them to their country of origin.

There is neither a repatriation agreement between Turkey and Syria nor a substantial UNHCR-led coordination on the matter, paving the way for unilateral action.

status and rights to access services, including access to camps (Mencütek 2019).

In fact, both spontaneous, or "voluntary," and ostensibly forced returns of Syrian refugees occur within Turkey in increasing numbers. As of May 2022, Turkish media sources report that 498,593 Syrians "voluntarily" returned home since the August 2016 start of Turkey's military operation in Syria, Euphrates Shield (Anadolu Ajansı 2022). UNHCR recorded 16,805 "voluntary" refugee returns from Turkey to Syria in 2020, and 5,124 additional ones during the first three months of 2021 (EASO 2021, 13). Most of these repatriations occur as refugee-initiated processes without any pre- or post-return assistance and monitoring by either the Turkish state or the UNHCR (Mencütek 2022a).[8] Besides self-initiated returns, Turkish national and local authorities use several practices for incentivizing and assisting repatriation, such as organizing information campaigns and logistical help to prospective returnees. Recently, Syrian grassroots initiatives and local councils that promote returns to northern Syria have also appeared (Mencütek 2022a). Various formal and informal tactics aim to portray a "positive" image of northern Syrian locations under Turkish control, which target potential returnees: mainly pro-government NGOs engage in reconstructing return narratives and supporting returnees inside Syria. The media also play a (limited) role in disseminating return narratives and seeking to influence public opinion (Atasü-Topçuoğlu 2019).

However, such unilateral actions on refugee repatriation are evident in other Turkish government policies, as well, with Turkish migration administrators adopting tactics aimed at coercing return. Limitations on access to shelter and public services are put into actions as deterrence techniques that oblige vulnerable Syrians to return, due to the lack of other alternatives for survival. Administrators arbitrarily use forced return as a form of punishment for those refugees involved in public spats or suspected of "terror links," without any judicial process (Mencütek 2022b). The numbers of forcibly returned Syrians reported by human rights organizations range from a few hundred (Amnesty International 2019; HRW 2019) to several thousands (SJAC 2021). Right-based advocacy groups, the Union of Turkish Bar Associations, as well as numerous scholars vehemently criticize these coercive practices and the threat of deportation in the disciplining of refugees for violating fundamental rights and international legal norms, including the principle of *non-refoulement* (Adar 2020; Içduygu and Nimer 2020).

How can one make sense of Turkey's unilateral policy toward the repatriation of Syrian refugees? Syrian repatriation has become a highly politicized issue in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. In terms of Syrians' domestic political economy effects, Turkey constitutes a refugee rentier state akin to Jordan and Lebanon, for refugees' presence facilitated the inflow of international humanitarian assistance to national coffers. The primary international donor is the EU, which seeks to prevent mixed migration flows to Europe while keeping Syrian refugees in Turkey. As a part of the 2016 EU–Turkey Statement, Brussels committed to granting 6 billion Euros, which would fund Turkey-based projects related to humanitarian assistance and capacity building in education, health, as well as municipal infrastructure. From the EU's perspective, the statement has functioned well for it decreased the number of arrivals to Greece (EC 2020), the first country of asylum in Europe (on this, see Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). The Turkish government also believes that the Statement has benefited the humanitarian sector and eased pressure on state agencies that provide direct services to refugees. At the same time, this compensation is not perceived as adequate: for Turkish officials, Brussels has failed to meet various political demands including visa liberalization for Turkish citizens or the restarting of EU accession talks.

Furthermore, European financial aid has not fully addressed the domestic political economy costs of refugee hosting for Turkey. Since 2016, social tensions between Syrian and Turkish locals, as well as instances of anti-Syrian discrimination and hate crimes, have been on the rise in parallel to soaring inflation and increasing unemployment (Özerim and Tolay 2020). Although around 930,000 Syrians actively work across Turkey, they remain at the bottom of the domestic labor market hierarchy: 96 percent of them are employed in the informal sector, where they are paid low wages and work longer hours (Caro 2020). As a result, Syrians' contribution to the national economy does not necessarily render the Turkish public sympathetic to the idea of perpetual coexistence. Instead, Turkish public opinion has supported ideas such as "putting them in safe zones inside Syria," "deporting them," and "establishing a Syrian-only city" (Erdogan 2020). Furthermore, political opposition parties such as Republican Public Party (*CHP* acronym in Turkish) and the Good Party (*İyi Parti*) have embraced a populist anti-Syrian discourse, promising to "sending Syrians back to their country of origin" in their election campaigns.

8 Research on the topic has identified that Syrians may choose to return home for several reasons including partial security in their hometowns, familial motivations, deteriorating living conditions, and rising discrimination within Turkey (Mencütek 2022b).

The June 2019 local elections became a critical juncture in this: the unexpected electoral loss of the AKP's candidate in the race for the mayorship of Istanbul, where over a million refugees are estimated to reside, was attributed to the presence of high numbers of Syrians in the province. The CHP candidate, Ekrem İmamoglu, who won the election, had committed to promoting Syrians' return, arguing that "there are around a million refugees in this city. We will develop pioneering policies about when and how Syrians should return to their home country" (Euronews 2019). Although there were numerous reasons why the AKP candidate lost the mayorship, including rising inflation, unemployment, and corruption, the growing reaction toward Syrians also featured at the constituency's priority list.[9] The Turkish government emphasized Syrians' return as a key objective in cross-border military operations, arguably to appease its domestic constituency and ensure that many Syrians would soon return to the "emancipated regions" inside Northern Syria, while those Syrians who threaten "public order" or "security" would be subject to immediate deportation.

Beyond domestic political economy reasons, geopolitics also helps explain Turkish reluctant toward a backscratching strategy on refugee repatriation and set it apart from Jordan's foreign policy position toward the Syrian conflict. In the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the Turkish government positioned itself against the Syrian's Assad regime, supporting a number of opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army and radical Islamist groups (Saraçoğlu and Demirkol 2015, p. 318). However, war dynamics changed over time with the proliferation of state and non-state actors fighting inside Syria. At the same time, Russia's consistent support for the Syrian regime urged Turkey to lessen its level of aggressiveness. Meanwhile, Kurdish forces (namely, the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF) expanded their control in northern and eastern Syria as the main US ally in the fight against ISIS/ISIL in 2015–2016. The Kurdish-controlled area stretching from the Euphrates River to the Iraq border is a space where Turkey sought to consolidate its power, asking for the formation of a no-fly zone or safe zone several times in international platforms. Turkey historically perceives any Kurdish forces, including SDF, as a "terrorist organization" linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a decades-long armed campaign for autonomy in Turkey. Under these conditions, the Turkish Government prioritized the prevention of any Kurdish state-like presence near its border with Syria. Along with the withdrawal of US troops backing the SDF forces, the Turkish government found additional opportunities for large-scale cross-border military operations, called Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017), Operation Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring Operation (2019). In each of these military operations, the goal of border security became closely linked with refugee repatriation at the discursive level to gain domestic and international legitimacy (Mencütek 2021).

Cross border operations have since consolidated Turkey's growing power in North Syria by ensuring control along the length of the entire border that prevents the formation of any Kurdish stalemate. So-called "safe regions" under Turkish military control were created after each operation (Adar 2020). These are also used to keep internally displaced people (IDPs) inside Syria, thus preventing new refugee flows to Turkey. Turkish state agencies and government-linked civil society organizations work with local Syrian actors, provide services in camps for IDPs and rebuild hospitals, schools, mosques, universities, other infrastructure, and local councils (Asseburg 2020). Taking advantage of the power vacuum in the northeast Syria, Turkey unilaterally imposed a "safe zone" of 460 km on the Syrian–Turkish border and sought to repatriate Syrian refugees in these areas along with reconstruction attempts. The Syrians are also encouraged to return these areas, while the Turkish forces there are accused of engaging in "demographic engineering."

Lebanon

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, Lebanon has been a main destination country for Syrian-displaced persons due to sharing a common border, as well as the two countries' intertwined socio-economic pre-war links. As of 2021, UNHCR estimated that the country hosts 887,853 as people of concern (UNHCR 2020).[10] Even though

9 For many commentators, "the question of Syrians besieges Turkish domestic politics" (Yüksek 2019). In this context, the Turkish government further recognized the possible electoral cost of Syrians. It engaged in a vast crackdown operation in Istanbul to rush the deportation of hundreds of irregular migrants, including Syrians who had registered in another province (Yenicag 2019). For many, the crackdown of 2019 was politically driven by the necessity to demonstrate to the electorate that the government was resolving the Syrian refugee problem, while also maintaining order and security everywhere.

10 The Lebanon government puts the number to 1.5 million Syrians, making Lebanon the country with the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita; see Karasapan and Shah (2021).

Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it hosts forcibly displaced Syrians, albeit without granting them refugee status. Despite its initially flexible, ad hoc admission policies, the Lebanese government later restricted the entry and stay of Syrians and ordered the UNHCR to suspend the registration of additional persons in 2015. The country's deeply rooted financial and political crises directly reflect on most refugees' living conditions, who reside in extreme poverty and suffer from particular difficulties in accessing legal residence, food, employment, and shelter, as well as deteriorating protection conditions (UNHCR 2020). These issues not only oblige Syrian to consider returning to Syria as a solution of last resort due to lack of any other option for surviving in Lebanon, but they also give authorities legitimacy for engaging in coerced repatriation and deportation, as many refugees lack formal registration or valid stay permits (Stel 2021).

In this context, the Lebanese government increasingly paints Syrians' repatriation as an ideal policy option, yet one in which Lebanon and the international community work together to achieve. In the words of the Lebanese Prime Minister at the Brussels III Conference on March 14, 2019: "we have no other option but to join hands and work together to address the obstacles and challenges facing the return of the displaced" (MTV Lebanon 2019). Despite their divergent stances in several domestic issues, Lebanese authorities (including political parties and the Ministry of Interior's General Security Office (GSO)) agreed on the importance of ensuring that the refugees' presence is temporary, ultimately expecting their necessary repatriation. In fact, it could be argued that Lebanon's approach to repatriation reflects its broader ambiguous policymaking toward forced displacement (Nassar and Stel 2019), and its informalized and fragmented refugee practices (Carpi 2019).

Syrians' return had been on the agenda as early as October 2014: a formal Lebanese policy document, Syrian Displacement Policy, published that month gently encourages refugees to leave Lebanon "by all possible means" (Stel and van der Meijden 2018). The push for return has become more urgent since 2018. The General Security Office (GSO), the agency regulating refugees' entry and stay in Lebanon, constitutes the most authoritative actor in this process. In May 2018, the GSO presented concrete proposals for repatriation (Stel and van der Meijden 2018). The GSO also started to cooperate with the Syrian regime to coordinate group returns, particularly for conducting a security check of the prospective returnee in conjunction with the Syrian authorities, and forwarding the returnee's personal details to the Syrian authorities. According to the GSO officers, only some 10 percent of return applications are rejected by Damascus during these checks, while GSO worked to repatriate approved thousands of Syrians (Bassam 2018). Another actor that has been involved in organizing returns is Hezbollah, a militant Shia movement that is allied to the GSO (EASO 2021, 14). There is little information available on practicalities and bargaining tactics of Hezbollah with Syrian authorities regarding returns. UNHCR Lebanon has not yet become involved in pre- or post-return monitoring despite the fact that refugees face risks of arrest, torture, or forced conscription upon return (SACD 2019a, 2019b). Lebanese authorities also forcibly return the Syrians who are pushed back from Cyprus (Euromed Rights 2021). UNHCR reported 5,006 and 11,052 individual returns in 2016 and 2017, respectively. In 2018, UNHCR recorded 16,729 returns (of whom 14,496 persons were known to UNHCR) including 5,596 individual returns and 11,133 self-organized and GSO-facilitated returns. UNHCR recorded 9,351 "voluntary" refugee returns from Lebanon to Syria in 2020 and 762 "voluntary" refugee returns during the first three months of 2021 (EASO 2021, 15).

Since the beginning of Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanese politicians' public speeches underlined that forced displacement threatens both Lebanon's identity and the state itself, because it has potential to further destabilize the fundamental roots of an already fragile political system and social order. Elites demonstrated concern that the permanent stay of a large number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon might alter the country's delicate demographic balance, considering that most of the Syrian refugees are Sunni (Assi 2019). Moreover, although the Lebanese economy benefits from the large numbers of non-encamped, low-wage Syrian workers (Turner 2015), the visibility of Syrians in urban spaces create increasing concerns for the Lebanese public and ruling elites (Carpi 2016). The Lebanese state arranged a gradual and nationwide securitization of Syrian refugees' presence, with the tacit support of media and political networks, in order to comfort its own citizens and to demonstrate its sovereignty over Lebanon's territory and population.[11]

Given the wide consensus among the Lebanese public concerning the rejection of Syrians' integration, repatriation seems to be the main possible option to policymakers. Since 2018, state authorities and

11 Moreover, as has been observed over the last few years, any political conflict among Lebanon's ruling political factions or broader crisis (such as the August 2020 massive explosion in Beirut and the COVID-19 pandemic) has severely affected refugees, displaced persons, and marginalized communities (Yassine 2020).

municipalities have limited Syrians' access to already-strained public services, such as health care. They have imposed strict residency permit regulations, persecuted small businesses and shops that employ foreign workers without a work permit, engaged in additional raids and imposed curfews, while also accelerating evictions from informal tented settlements under the pretext of security and economy concerns (Stel and van der Meijden 2018; Yassine 2020). Across Lebanon, evictions have become an informal practice of encouraging returns, as a written eviction order is often accompanied by verbal orders to "return to Syria" (Stel and van der Meijden 2018). Such practices appear to first seek to mark the territory as Lebanese, that is, to manage and control the "home" territory, where Lebanese are "outnumbered and overpopulated" by Syrians (Carpi 2016).

Like Jordan, Lebanon is considered a refugee rentier state. Besides international humanitarian assistance and the UNHCR's substantial responsibility taking in registration and protection until May 2015, Lebanon also benefitted from EU-sponsored financial aid, capacity-building, and trade facilitation schemes (Fakhoury 2020b). In fact, the country has been the recipient of one of the largest per capita aid and support packages since 2016, mainly channeled to specific Lebanese ministries and state institutions (Uzelac and Meester 2018). However, compared to Jordan, Lebanon has a more tense and fluctuating relation with international humanitarian organizations, as observed in the state's decision to suspend UNHCR's long-term registration function, even though the organization served as the primary provider for meeting the needs of the country's refugees. This suspension decision can be attributed to Lebanon's objectives to "lower down" the number of refugees in the country by restricting access to territory and encourage returns (Janmyr 2018, 393). In addition, Lebanon is concerned about the plethora of international organizations that have proliferated as a result of the Syrian crisis: they are seen to bypass the government in managing refugee affairs and allocating funding, a phenomenon that does not hold any benefit for the crumbling Lebanese infrastructure or vulnerable local communities (Mencütek 2018, 175). Lebanese elites agreed to only accept Syrians' temporary stay but avoid the refugee integration option imposed by the international community (Fakhoury and Stel 2022, 5). To this end, Lebanon looked for increasing its negotiation power in international platforms to attract more funding.

These concerns also intersect with Lebanese actors' geostrategic interests in the Syrian civil war (Assi 2018, 2019), for Lebanon has well-grounded concerns about the war's spillover effects (Yacubian 2014). Historically, the country has been at constant risk of becoming a battle ground, suffering invasions, political violence, and civil strife that are due to both its proximity to two occupying forces—Israel and Syria—and its complex socio-political fabric and sectarian power-sharing structure. Moreover, researchers have argued that the civil war contributed to the emergence of radical Salafist militancy in Palestinian refugee camps (Dot-Pouillard 2015) and accelerated the smuggling of weapons and jihadi-oriented fighters that used Lebanon as a transit to access Syria, raising further security concerns (Assi 2018). In this context, displaced Syrians seeking shelter in Lebanon emerged as a politically divisive issue among political factions from the very beginning. Arguably, the Syrian civil war has upset the country's precarious domestic equilibrium (Fakhoury 2015) by exacerbating the political and sectarian fragmentation within the Lebanese government (Assi 2018).

Unlike Turkey and akin to Jordan, the Lebanese government does not hold any revisionist take in the region. It should come as no surprise that the Syrian civil war's quick settlement and the immediate stabilization of the region would be beneficial for the interests of the Lebanese state and its officials. Despite efforts to dissociate itself from the war, the Lebanese government had to coordinate with the Syrian regime in order to prevent spillover effects and to manage the refugee issues (Assi 2018). Lebanon's approach was also shaped by its relations with Russia: by early 2018, the Syrian regime declared victory over opposition forces (Assi 2019), while in summer 2018, Russia proposed a plan to repatriate Syrians from Lebanon and Jordan, serving as a key ally of Syria. President Michel Aoun of Lebanon recognized Bashar Assad as Syria's president and started to communicate with him on that basis (Assi 2018).

In June 2018, Russia's envoy to Syria visited not only Damascus, but also Amman and Beirut, in order to invite them to work on return options for displaced refugees, while calling for international organizations and international donors to support the process of rebuilding Syria. The Lebanese government quickly welcomed the Russian proposal about repatriation: in July 2020, the government adopted a framework plan for organizing Syrian's return plan, although it has not yet implemented it (Amnesty International 2021). Lebanon's GSO, sometimes in coordination with Hezbollah, also started to organize the return of Syrians (Ahmado 2018). Lebanese authorities speeded up deporting Syrians who "entered in an "illegal" manner between mid-2019 and late 2020," with the numbers of deportees reaching 6,000; some encountered unlawful detentions and other human rights violations upon their return to Syria (Amnesty International 2021).

Moreover, Lebanon attributed a symbolic meaning to Syrian refugees' repatriation, linked to a belief that such a return would signal the normalization of the Syrian state and the Syrian regime's consolidation of power across the war-torn country (Assi 2019). Again, international cooperation on refugee repatriation becomes linked to the absence of a revisionist take on the region, with Lebanon approaching refugee returns as granting momentum to the reconstruction of the home state (cf. Petrin 2002), and marking progress by validating the Syrian regime's legitimacy (cf. Black and Koser 1999). The return of displaced persons is depicted as an indicator of the wellbeing and maturity of the home state's political order, signaling the success of a political process (McDowell and Eastmond 2002, 2–3). As noted, in the context of the Syrian civil war, the "massive return of refugees is a political strategy to provide an international legitimacy to the Syrian government" (Assi 2019). Evidently, Lebanon's material gains from refugee rentierism matter less the country's geopolitical interests in building good relations with ongoing Syrian regime and its allies, namely Russia. At the same time, there are distinct commonalities between Jordan and Lebanon, which help explain why a backscratching approach toward the repatriation of Syrian refugees became preferable to a blackmailing one.

Understanding Refugee Rentier States' Repatriation Policymaking

In placing the three states' responses in conversation with each other, some distinct patterns appear to emerge: for one, both Jordan and Lebanon sought to engage in bargaining with the international community and explicitly avoided adopting any unilateral action that may aggravate Western donors. On the other hand, Turkey was much more direct by engaging in threats, and not hesitating to adopt unilateral action that involved the repatriation of Syrian refugees to their home country without coordinating with donors. This appears consistent with the initial expectations of the refugee rentier state thesis, according to which refugee host states calculate specific costs and benefits when engaging with the international community in terms of the management of forced migration that refer to domestic political economy and geopolitical matters. While the initial framework did not engage in the matter of refugee return, we believe that the three cases examined here allow for its expansion on the issue of refugee repatriation in distinct ways.

First, it becomes apparent that a cooperative, or *backscratching*, strategy may be explained by the importance that the Jordanian and Lebanese state place on international aid. The consistent belief that domestic policymakers have held since 2015 has been that cooperation with richer states of the Global North is imperative if Jordan and Lebanon are to withstand the Syrian refugee crisis. This, ultimately, affects the two refugee rentier states' management of repatriation: by avoiding unilateral action and highlighting processes of cooperation and bargaining, the two states seek to ensure that they will not put any obstacles to continuing flows of foreign aid into state coffers.

Second, beyond domestic political economy concerns, the two states also share a similar geopolitical outlook vis-à-vis the region, namely the lack of a revisionist approach toward the future of the Syrian state. They strategically avoid taking any unilateral actions that might disrupt bilateral relations and normalization efforts. The refugee rentier state framework highlights the importance of forcibly displaced populations in host states' foreign policy decision-making, and refugee repatriation fits well with that expectation: in the absence of a specific geopolitical goal that refugee return might help attain for Jordan and Lebanon, state elites are more likely to avoid raising questions of refugee repatriation (particularly given the domestic political economy importance of continuing inflows of refugee rent). Ultimately, an analysis of Jordanian and Lebanese policymaking helps us understand the continuing importance of domestic political economy and geopolitics in shaping refugee rentier states' backscratching policies on repatriation.

Turkey, on the other hand, demonstrates a different outlook regarding both domestic political economy and geopolitical factors. Turkey is characterized as a middle-range power in the international order (Parlal Dal 2016), as well as a stronger regional actor due to its population size, economic scale, and military power. The Turkish government has both the willingness and material capacity for deploying stronger border techniques and conducting unilateral long-lasting cross-border military interventions in neighboring countries when there is a power vacuum (Mencütek 2022a). This turns into actual space-making practices when the government perceives of a "security threat," such as launching a unilateral repatriation operation, as being partially observed in the 1991 Turkish–Iraqi border and current cross-border operations and administrative involvement in Northern Syria (ibid.). Importantly, Turkey is also distinct in its geopolitical outlook toward the future of the Syrian state: in sharp contrast to Lebanon and Jordan, Turkey has vested interests in not returning to the pre-2011 *status quo ante* in the Eastern Mediterranean, which encourages Turkish elites to employ refugee repatriation to benefit their goals. In sharp contrast to

Jordan and Lebanon, Turkish elites have repeatedly asserted the importance of Syrian refugees and their placement in strategic points in order to maximize Turkey's influence and power over the region. The revisionist take that Turkey has adopted in the context of Syria's future makes it distinct from Lebanon and Jordan, and provides the second driver to its refugee repatriation policy. In other words, the absence of a strong interest in securing external economic and the adoption of a revisionist policy toward Syria distance Turkey from Lebanon and Jordan, and help explain its blackmailing strategy toward refugee repatriation. Lebanon and Jordan are more minor regional actors, lacking such a capacity without the support of international forces, hence their direct military engagement in Syria remained short-term and limited.

One counterargument that should be addressed relates to the refugee rentier state's geopolitical location, with Turkey being more likely to engage in blackmailing given its proximity and shared borders with the EU, which allows its policy to be more successful by making its threats tangible (on this, see also Tsourapas 2019). At the same time, one would also argue that Turkey's status as a regional middle-power—given its population size and economic scale—would encourage the use of blackmailing. While Turkey's geopolitical strength and position may amplify its credibility as a blackmailer compared to Jordan and Lebanon, its repatriation policy is, by default, aimed at the return of Syrians to their home country and does not involve threats of "refugee crises" on the European periphery, similar to 2015–2016. In terms of refugee repatriation, at least, while such factors are important, they are less relevant in dictating refugee rentier states' strategy. Another counterargument concerns the primacy of domestic political calculations, rather than foreign policy, in shaping decisions on repatriation. However, that would provide an incomplete account of states' policymaking, given the involvement of outside actors in the management of refugee return and the expectations from scholarly work on refugee diplomacy.

How does the refugee rentier state theory's expectations regarding repatriation policymaking travel beyond Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey? One historical case that links to the theory's broader applicability is the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (Sundaram 2021). Between March 1971 and October 1971, Pakistan's crackdown on hundreds of thousands of Bengalis led to the influx of nearly ten million refugees into India. The Indian administration reasoned that the crisis is not Pakistan's responsivity but, rather, a problem threatening India's security and national integrity as the country was burdened with a massive influx of refugees. Indira Gandhi did not hesitate to issue threats to the international community and engage in military intervention in East Pakistan in December, preparing the ground for the preferred realpolitik policy of refugee repatriation (Sundaram 2021). After a brief war, millions of the refugees returned to a new homeland, now independent Bangladesh. This event remains the largest refugee repatriation operation of the post–Second World War era (UNHCR 2010). India's choice of blackmailing was related to the country's interventionist policy and has distinct similarities to Turkish aims in Northern Syria, and the use of Syrians' repatriation in this. Turkey's response to the 1991 Iraqi Kurdish refugee flows can test the theory's broader applicability. At the time, the Turkish government forced the repatriation of thousands of Iraqi Kurds in a very short period outside its borders. This unilateral approach highlighted Turkey's national security costs, as elites also argued that it was a legitimate strategy given the reluctance of Western governments to resettle them (Abdelataay 2021, 100–102).

In terms of states' adoption of a backscratching strategy on refugee repatriation, a useful comparison can be made with Pakistan, a refugee rentier state containing one of the largest numbers of forcibly displaced persons. Pakistan has often ambivalent attitudes about millions of refugees from its neighboring Afghanistan and has repeatedly stated the goal of repatriation of Afghan refugees (Mielke 2022). Pakistani strategy on the matter has been strongly affected by its geopolitical interests, mainly regarding its relations with the United States, and its domestic security concerns. Interestingly, when international donors briefly reduced the amounts of international aid to Afghan refugees within the country, Pakistan began issuing threats of mass refoulement (Field 1998). Reminiscent of Jordanian and Lebanese strategy on the matter, sustained international economic support have ensured Pakistani governments continue a strategy of backscratching: Pakistan avoided unilateral actions, preferring to engage in several tripartite agreements (1993, 2003, 2007) and repatriations strategies (2010–2012), in coordination with UNHCR, which led to the return of thousands of Afghans through "voluntary return" assistance program funded by the international community (UNHCR 2016; Ahmad 2017).

Another refugee rentier state, Kenya, repatriated Somali refugees both in 1993 and 2013 (see Abdelaaty 2021, 158). Kenya prioritized safeguarding its security by requiring the initial encampment of Somalis and their later repatriation. Kenya's dependency on the international community, particularly UNHCR for assistance to Somalis, dictated a backscratching strategy that led to the tripartite agreement among Kenya, Somalia, and

UNHCR to establish a framework for "voluntary" returns. As observed in Afghan returns from Pakistan, the Kenyan approach also illustrates how "the UNHCR helped to diffuse the tripartite agreement as a strategy for institutionalized refugee rent and to organize regional fundraising" (Freier, Micinski, and Tsourapas 2021). Tanzania also sought to repatriate Burundian refugees in the period of 2015–2020. Slightly different than other cases (still echoing Lebanon), the Tanzanian government directly coordinated with the government of Burundi. As in the case of the Syrian regime's engagement with Lebanon and Jordan, the Burundian government sought to repatriate refugees in order to indicate that peace and stability had returned after years of political crisis. The Tanzanian government is also likely to cooperate as it seeks to normalize relations with neighboring Burundi and to decrease the number of refugees in the country and, thereby, gain domestic popularity (Schwartz 2019). Beyond Africa, Bangladesh has also developed a strategy of backscratching in its attempts to repatriate hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. In the absence of any revisionist policy in the region, Bangladesh has accepted Chinese mediation in its ongoing negotiations with Myanmar and has coordinated on Rohingyas' repatriation with the United Nations and the Myanmar government via a 2018 Memorandum of Understanding (Rahman 2021).

Conclusion

Although states typically make strategic calculations about their approaches to refugee repatriation driven by domestic factors, geopolitical dynamics, and foreign policy considerations, existing research has yet to offer a concrete framework that explains this behavior. In this paper, we propose a framework that explains variation on refugee host states' policies toward repatriation by building on emerging research within international relations and security studies. We expand the concept of *refugee rentierism* in order to inductively theorize the conditions shaping states' policymaking on the repatriation of forcibly displaced populations within their borders. We identify how the domestic political economy cost of hosting a large refugee population and a state's geostrategic interests vis-à-vis refugees' country of origin impact its repatriation strategies. If forced displacement has produced a high domestic political economy cost and the refugee rentier state has adopted an interventionist policy vis-à-vis the country of origin, it is expected to pursue a *blackmailing* strategy. Turkey's post-2016 discourse and attempts focusing on the return of Syrian refugees exemplify such an approach. Alternatively, if these two conditions are absent, as is the case in Jordan and Lebanon, a refugee rentier state is more likely to pursue a *backscratching* strategy based on bargains with the international community.

As research continues to examine the conditions driving states' repatriation strategies, we believe that a comparative approach building on this paper's argumentation will help explain numerous historical and contemporary cases. Arguably, interest-based approaches regarding the rationale behind refugee host states' behavior currently reflect existing reality more accurately than normative discourses around the protection of human rights, for instance. This is also evident in the broader policymaking agenda driving the return of rejected asylum seekers or irregular migrants across the Global North. Within the Global South, a refugee rent-seeking framework will allow for stronger insights across the management of displacement crises in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and elsewhere.

Finally, it should also be stressed how refugee repatriation, although it might appear as a preferred policy option for refugee rentier states, constitutes neither a durable solution nor an end to the displacement cycle for refugees. Despite pragmatic repatriation policies across several cases—Bosnia, Myanmar, and the African Great Lakes, for instance—the suffering of forcibly displaced populations remains. Thus, a fruitful avenue for future research may be the problematization of the increasingly central role that the state has come to play in the management of forced displacement, as international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other actors within the global refugee regime appear to yield important ground to governments' rent-seeking behavior. Ultimately, only with a fuller understanding of refugee rentier states' behavior and strategies may we begin to uncover the obscure ways toward more efficient protection of forcibly displaced populations.

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