Migration Rentierism in the Middle East

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Introduction

The complex histories of migration into, out of, and across the Middle East have historically provided a fruitful area for social scientists to theorize beyond empirically grounded research. This volume of the POMEPS Studies series aims to understand the political economy of migration in the Middle East by drawing on the concepts of rent and rent-seeking, as these originated from the study of oil-producing states in the Middle East (POMEPS Introduction). In this theoretical piece, we analyze how varied types of cross-border mobility can be brought together under the overarching theoretical framework of migration rentierism and identify promising future avenues of research. Initially, we identify the need for an expansive framework of migration politics in the Middle East that considers the artificial distinctions between different types of mobility, the various levels through which migration rentierism politics operate, and how these may serve as material and immaterial resources for states and non-state actors alike. We proceed by offering a definition of migration rent and migration rentierism before discussing four types of migration rentier states in the Middle East: emigration, immigration, exile, and refugee rentier states. We call for a more nuanced understanding of the politics of Middle East migration and conclude with avenues for future research.

The concept of rent has recently been introduced across studies on migration politics in two ways. On the one hand, "refugee rentier states" employ their position as host states of forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or "refugee rent," from other state or non-state actors to maintain these populations within their borders (Tsourapas 2019). Far from being an idiosyncrasy of Middle East states, refugee rent-seeking behavior is expanding across both the Global South (Micinski 2021) and the Global North (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022).

On the other hand, rentier states are heavily reliant upon immigration for their wealth and political stability, deriving unearned income and political benefits from immigration as "migration rent" (Thiollet 2019; 2021). Immigration rentier states emerged as governments progressively bureaucratized the political and financial rent extracted from the control of immigrants' sojourn and labor, which was initially brokered by private actors, notably in the MENA region through the Kafala system (Thiollet 2024).

The concepts of refugee and immigration rentier states have proven fruitful and generative to understand (forced) migration politics in the region and beyond. Still, current theorization of migration merits expansion to accommodate the full gamut of human mobility, including labor emigration and forced exile. We acknowledge the limits of dichotomous approaches to human mobility that artificially separate forced from so-called voluntary migration and refugees from other migrants based on legally designed and policy-driven distinctions rather than migrants' experiences (Bakewell 2021; Thiollet, Pastore, and Schmoll 2023). In the Middle East, the constructed nature of distinctions established between forced and voluntary migration stands out as only Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Yemen have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. Across the region, migration and refugee policies operate within common frames and use common instruments, yet with differentiated implementation across migrant groups based on geopolitical and economic interests as well as moral and symbolic drivers of protection (Elmadmad 2002; 2008; Chatty 2013). As such, the distinction between forced and voluntary or economic mobility typically relies upon political operations of selection and differentiation between groups of migrants. Such operations are framed here as moral economy and are part and parcel of the political economy of migration rentierism. This understanding of the forced or voluntary migration distinction emphasizes the importance of material

or moral preferences and rationalities in migration policymaking.

At the same time, an expanded framework needs to feed into larger debates on how mobility constitutes a political and economic resource for state and non-state actors alike, while also engaging with long-standing discussions on the political pathologies of rentierism. In order to do so, we distance our contribution from overly psychological takes on so-called rentier mentalities, which tend to essentialize individuals and groups (Hertog 2020). Instead, we refer both the strategic and moral approaches to rent-seeking mechanisms using the overarching notion of a "moral economy" (Thompson 1971), which provides moral value and justifications for given political behaviors. By offering a novel theoretical framework that remains empirically grounded in the Middle East, we also seek to expand the theoretical reach of concepts empirically grounded in the non-Western contexts to broader theories of migration, thereby decentering the scientific gaze (Liu-Farrer and Yeoh 2018; Chung 2017).

Conceptually, we take these considerations into account as we put forth migration rent as an object of analysis that refers to the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of material and immaterial income from labor and forced migration. Migration rent corresponds to both socio-economic and political resources, which may be derived either from controlling the movement of people into, across, or out of countries or from the exploitation of foreign labor, foreign identities, and the lives of (forced) migrants. Our concept of migration rent combines various forms of economic and political rent, including financial, social, and political remittances, and income extraction through exchange rates and financial infrastructures or direct and indirect taxes; in sum, all forms of economic and symbolic capital derived from policies related to cross-border population mobility. We argue that the political economy of the Middle East cannot be disassociated from migration rentierism, namely the political operations around the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of material and immaterial migration rent. Varied forms of migration rentierism operate across domestic, international, and transnational levels that involve both state and non-state actors. For the purposes of this piece, a central component of these processes is the migration rentier state, namely state or quasi-state entities that organize the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of migration rent through contingent policies as well as formal and informal institutions.

Unpacking Migration Rentierism in the Middle East

We identify four types of migration rentier states, relying on two sets of distinction: between mostly economically driven migration (or, labor migration), and forced displacement (or, forced migration); and between out-migration and in-migration. We consider both formal and informal processes and institutions at work in the extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of migration rent, and note the need to factor in connections between state and societal institutions, as well as the role of institutional configurations and moral economies.[1] We identify four types of rentierism: *emigration rentierism*, in

Table 1: Four Types of Migration Rentier States

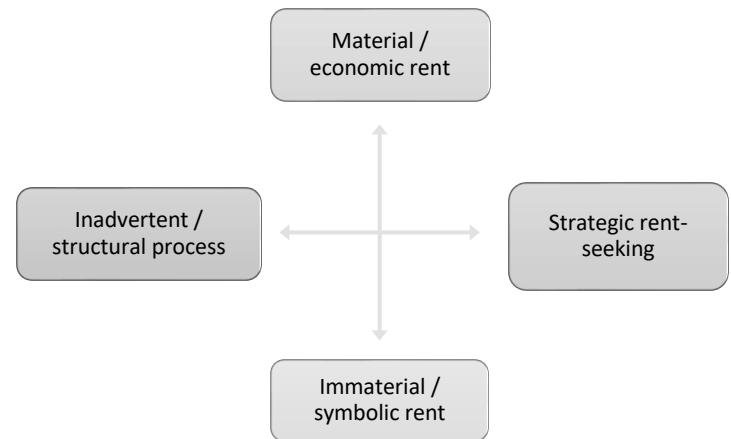|	Out-migration	In-migration
Labor migration	**Emigration rentierism** *Rent-seeking as development*	**Immigration rentierism** *Rent-seeking as membership*
Forced migration	**Exile rentierism** *Rent-seeking as appropriation*	**Refugee rentierism** *Rent-seeking as solidarity*

which rent-seeking is implicated in processes of political and economic development; *immigration rentierism*, which links rent-seeking to questions of socio-economic and political membership; *exile rentierism*, where rent-seeking relies on strategies of appropriation; and, finally, *refugee rentierism*, where rent-seeking is implicated in questions of solidarity.[2]

We also examine the nature of migration rent and the various ways it is extracted (or not) across policy levels. We consider various types of mechanisms and policies involved in migration rent-seeking (extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution), including formal and informal processes and institutions at the domestic, international, and transnational levels. Rent-seeking can be strategic and explicitly framed in contingent refugee or migration policies to gain advantages, symbolic or material, at the domestic, transnational, or international levels. Rent-seeking is also embedded in institutions and social structures with little or no explicit politicization. As such, it can be structural, "inadvertent," or accidental and thus include a continuum of drivers of political outcomes from institutions to policymaking, or the absence of formal policymaking altogether (Mufti 2014). Finally, although we focus on migration rentierism as a state-led process, we also consider the public–private partnerships at work in the design and implementation of (forced) migration policies. Notably, this helps to bring in the role of international and domestic intergovernmental and non-state actors such as diasporas, charities, civil society organizations, and international organizations. We reckon that these actors may operate against, for, or in partnership with states and state policies. These variations induce a complex array of configurations summarized in the matrix below.

Empirical Discussion

Emigration rentiers are actors that monetize labor mobility for purposes of *development*, as in the case of Yemen, Lebanon, or Egypt. The nature of this development is predominantly material or economic, and an extensive interdisciplinary literature has linked economic development and emigration (Haas, Castles, and Miller

Figure 1: Types of Rent and Types of Migration Rent-Seeking Processes

2020). But emigration rentierism also has a symbolic-political dimension as a nationalistic project involving mobilization of diasporas to extract financial and political remittances. States as well as private actors seek to harness "social remittances" (Levitt 1998) as cultural vectors of change. Others have focused on harnessing "political remittances" (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020), for instance via expatriate voting (Lafleur 2013). Over the last decade, an emerging literature on the politics of emigration across countries of origin, or "sending states," has sought to further explore the socio-economic and political connotations of emigration rentierism (Gamlen 2008). A second line of work seeks to problematize how emigration rentierism may be linked to regime stability in particular (Natter and Thiollet 2022).

Emigration rent-seeking strategies typically revolve around the construction of domestic institutions that seek to promote citizens' emigration abroad via legal or administrative policies (Brand 2006; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2023), as well as offering educational and training opportunities for prospective emigrants (Del Sordi 2018). Emigration rent-seeking may also seek to address other domestic political economy indicators, including unemployment and overpopulation (Martin 1991; Mosley and Singer 2015). States' dependence on emigration rent pushes labor emigration to the forefront of migration diplomacy (Thiollet 2011; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019).

While the literature has predominantly focused on the state as the main emigration rentier actor (Heisler 1985), private emigration rentiers are also active in the form of recruitment companies, brokers, and smugglers (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012).

Immigration rentiers are actors that seek to monetize *membership* to their domestic labor market, as in the cases of Libya or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Immigration rentiers are frequently states that face demographic constraints, namely the lack of a large enough—or sufficiently trained—domestic labor force, which leads them to rely on foreign labor to satisfy their labor market's unskilled, semi-skilled, or high-skilled needs. In such contexts, debates emerge around the permanence of such immigrant communities (Thiollet 2010; Lori 2019), the extent of immigrants' integration (Geddes 2001), and the protection of human rights (Jiménez-Alvarez, Espiñeira, and Gazzotti 2021). Invariably, questions of citizenship and citizenship regimes emerge. Recruitment firms, brokers, and a range of other non-state immigration rentier actors become implicated in regulating entry into these states' labor market (Thiollet 2019), oftentimes seeking to influence migration diplomacy (Malit and Tsourapas 2021).

Immigration rent-seeking comes in different forms. Historically, guest-worker programs in Europe and North America sought to address Western domestic labor market inefficiencies by recruiting unskilled and low-skilled foreign workers, whose presence in host states was intended to be timebound (Castles 1985). A similar contemporary phenomenon is GCC states' labor recruitment policies, which link membership of a GCC state's labor market to employment contracts. In the Middle East, as in Asia, these practices have enabled the structuring of a "migration industry" of private intermediaries (Beaugé 1986; Beaugrand and Thiollet 2023; Babar 2021). Some immigration rentier states are keen to adopt citizenship-by-investment and "golden visa" schemes, where matters of belonging, inclusion, and rights are defined in entrepreneurial, rather than legal, terms (Mavelli 2018; Shachar 2017).

Exile rentierism refers to actors that monetize forced displacement for legitimacy, economic resources, and state-building purposes via processes of positive and negative *appropriation*, as in the cases of Israel, Eritrea, South Sudan, as well as the Palestinian and Kurdish political organizations. Exile rentierism, as with other forms of rentierism, concerns both material and immaterial resources but with a strong emphasis on the moral economy of suffering and victimhood of refugees as a political ground for state-building claims. This element links many exile rentiers with the projection of a sense of suffering on the transnational stage and in multilateral politics. The Kurds (Kaya 2020) as well as the Palestinians (Sayigh 1997) have sought to legitimize their struggle for statehood using the symbolic capital of victimhood and refugeeism as well as the political legitimacy of state claims in regional ideologies (pan-Arabism). Historically, Jews, Armenians, and Eritreans (Thiollet 2018) have also leveraged claims of statehood and refugeeism to support their liberation struggles and state-building efforts. But states also engage in the process of exile rentierism, as they seek to continue processes of nation- and state-building, with (Craven 2021) or without (Moss 2022) the support of their diaspora communities.

Exile rent-seeking takes place via positive and/or negative appropriation of diasporic capital (Baser and Öztürk 2020). Positive appropriation is linked to diaspora activism that is perceived to contribute to state-building and legitimacy—state and non-state actors often draw on such diaspora communities for support (Margheritis 2015). Negative appropriation occurs when diaspora activism is perceived as a threat to state-building and legitimacy, leading to the development of transnational repression and authoritarianism by state and non-state actors alike (Glasius 2017; Tsourapas 2021). Appropriation concerns both political and economic capital. Researchers have highlighted the importance of refugees' remittances for regions of origin; they have also underlined the reliance of quasi-states or political organizations in exile on systems of taxation of diasporas of refugees: this is the case in Eritrea (Kibreab 2000) as well as in the case of Kurdish or Somali political organizations (Horst and Van Hear 2002).

Finally, the monetization of forced mobility by refugee rentiers has a distinctive element of *solidarity*, which we identify in the cases of Jordan, Türkiye, Sudan, and Iran. The literature has provided ample explanations for such interstate solidarity, which may be linked to economic structures, colonial linkages, postcolonial politics, or ethno-cultural or minority rights. Regional and political solidarity has consolidated into legal frameworks for refugee protection in Africa (Organisation for African Unity Convention) and Latin America (Cartagena Convention) and in the context of the League of Arab States. Typically, refugee rent-seeking revolves around solidarity mechanisms pegged to symbolic rewards for regimes granting asylum to selected groups of displaced persons (Chatty 2013), and around requests for economic concessions in the form of economic aid, preferential trade agreements, or other material benefits (Tsourapas 2019). Other states may target non-material concessions, for instance in the form of recognition of colonial-era injustices (Paoletti 2010). Refugee rentiers tend to rely on foreign policy to extract concessions (Micinski 2021).

Going Forward

In bringing together the established scholarship on rentierism with debates on migration politics, one contribution of this study is to identify how the concept of migration rent is able to shed much-needed light on complex processes of extraction, accumulation, and (re)distribution of income from labor and forced migration across the Middle East. We propose an expansive definition that encompasses both material and immaterial income, which may be derived either from controlling the movement of people into, across, or out of countries, or from the exploitation of foreign labor, foreign identities, and the lives of (forced) migrants. We define four different types of migration rentier states—emigration, immigration, exile, and refugee rentier states—that allow a re-examination of rent-seeking. In turn, this strengthens claims to development, membership, appropriation, and solidarity. In so doing, we pave the way for the varied analyses of the politics of migration rentierism across this POMEPS Studies issue, which draw from contemporary and historical case studies across the Middle East.

Going forward, we expect that the study of labor and forced migration through the prism of rent will allow a deeper understanding of the international politics of cross-border mobility—namely, how migration rent is *extracted*, *accumulated*, and *(re)distributed*. Focusing on extraction, the concept of migration rent sheds light on certain states' limited material resources, which prevents them from supporting large numbers of forcibly displaced populations, or on others' structural dependence on processes of labor emigration or immigration. It also allows for clearer identification of the material and immaterial ways through which income is extracted. In the context of accumulation, migration rent enables a focus on how such income is channeled not merely by state actors but also by citizens (who may act as recruiters, sponsors, or intermediaries), private companies, or broader networks. In this instance, migration rent accumulation in emigration rentier contexts is remarkably akin to immigration and refugee rentier ones. Finally, migration rent (re)distribution identifies how such forms of material and immaterial resources may affect fragile domestic political balances—for instance, in terms of supporting "vulnerable" citizens across refugee rentiers or empowering citizens as sponsors across immigration rentiers.

At the same time, our hope is that the POMEPS Study's theoretical discussion on varieties of migration rentierism will serve as a stepping stone for ambitious, cross-disciplinary work on the topic. Our attempt to draw from the empirical richness of the Middle East for theory-building purposes attests to the region's importance and centrality for future academic work. Thus, we encourage scholars to carry our efforts forward in offering a more nuanced view of the political economy of the Middle East, in which cross-border mobility serves a central role—either in historic contexts of colonial and postcolonial politics or in contemporary politics. Importantly, we also hope that the underlying structures that our theoretical framework exposes prove useful to scholars of migration politics in other parts of the world—namely, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, or Asia. Our ambition is that such exercises in joint theorizations of migration politics developed from underexplored areas of the world pave the way for novel understandings of migration politics in which the Middle East, and the wider Global South, enjoy a central position.

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Endnotes

[1] Following the example of early work on the rentier state (see also Lynch and Tsourapas 2024), this line of research has benefited from a value-neutral definition of refugee/immigration rent, and a value-loaded definition of rentierism and rent-seeking.

[2] We acknowledge that a particular state might fit into multiple types, particularly for states that have both high emigration and larger diasporas alongside large numbers of refugees, such as Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, or Yemen. As such, our typology aims to offer an analytical tool to understand the logics and practice of migration rentierism.