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Elias Dahrouge

THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE LEBANESE STATE IDENTITY

The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Lebanese State Identity Through Discourse and Actions (2005-2020)

Doctoral Dissertation

Supervisor

Dr. László Csicsmann

Associate Professor

Budapest, 2022

Institute of International Studies

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Abstract

Lebanon developed since its creation a very peculiar form of political system. The Lebanese *consociational* system was created to preserve a fair representation of its various religious communities through a quota-based power-sharing model. Hence, factors that endanger the fragile sectarian demographic balance are perceived as a threat. But following the Syrian conflict that started in 2011, Lebanon became the host for 1,5 million of Syrian refugees, making it one of the countries with the highest rates of refugee per capita in the world. The following thesis examines how has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted on the Lebanese state identity. This is operationalized through 4 main steps: (1) the review of the Lebanese nation-building process and the main elements of its state identity; (2) the comprehensive presentation of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and its heavy contextual frame, with the Palestinian refugee precedent being its cornerstone; (3) analyzing the official discourse of the state, and (4) tracing the intentions behind its policies and behaviors, in order to track changes in its identity content. The thesis argues that while the refugee crisis had some impact on the state identity, it does not contradict its core elements. In addition, the thesis redefines Syrian refugees of Lebanon as *internationally displaced persons*, and confronts theoretical literature with empirical findings from the field, making it a novelty in its discipline.

Introduction

Lebanon has been the subject of various studies and analyses throughout the past century. The attraction of scholars for examining it from multiple angles comes from a variety of special and fascinating features that characterize this small Levantine nation. One of these features is linked to the peculiar nature of its political system. Indeed, Lebanon is known for its religious and cultural diversity and pluralism which were translated into the core of its polity. As a system, it is often defined as a form of *consociationalism* which grants fair representation for its religious communities. This representation is based on a consensual power-sharing model in which communities have quotas that are allocated according to the respective demographic weights of each sect. Nevertheless, the nature of this model has proven to be quite fragile. One of the reasons lays in the fragility of the sectarian demographic balance on which the status quo is built. In fact, any major demographic change would endanger its stability. The fear of such probability is perceived as a threat by many in the society and the elites. Furthermore, the Palestinian refugees who escaped their homeland some 70 years ago constitute – through their involvement in the Lebanese politics – a precedent that cannot be underestimated when trying to understand the perception of fear and resentment against any refugee population. It is in this context that the upcoming developments must be framed.

Following the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Lebanon witnessed the massive influx of refugees from its neighboring country. While the estimates might vary, the numbers exceed the million. Lebanon soon became among the countries with the highest rates of refugees per capita around the world. The impact of such a flood was considerable. It affected the host country on various levels. But beyond these consequences, what about the demographic status quo? How did the state react to their presence? What was their impact on its state identity? To answer such questions, the research must try to understand how identity and state identity change in general. Afterwise, it must define the elements and actors of the Lebanese identity and its state. Then, it has to examine the Syrian refugee crisis in-depth in order to "feel" the perceptions of Lebanese towards them. It is only after these step that the state's potential identity change can be interpreted through the state's discourses, behaviors and actions towards Syrian refugees.

In the wake of what was expressed above, Chapter 1 of this thesis starts by presenting the adopted research methodology. Then, Chapter 2 reviews the literature of identity and state identity. Later,

Chapter 3 traces back the Lebanese nation-building and state identity construction through its modern history. As a next step, Chapter 4 evaluates the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon in a comprehensive way. In parallel, Chapter 5 tries to reconceptualize the Syrian refugees of Lebanon by providing a more adapted definition for their case, through linking empirical findings with existing theories of migration. Finally, Chapter 6 analyzes the discourse of the state and tries to interpretate the motives behind its actions regarding the Syrian refugees. Through discourse and action, it gives an answer to how has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted the Lebanese state identity.

Chapter 1: Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore the probable repercussions of the Syrian refugee influx on the Lebanese state identity. This simple initial thought enables us to formulate the main research question of this thesis. The question is the following:

How has the Syrian refugee crisis affected or shaped the Lebanese state identity?

The attempt of providing answers to this simple question identifies the need of breaking it down to many other equally important sub-questions. This step would enable us to find answers for all its constituting elements. Identity is measured through its content, the contestation of content, as well as through actions. Therefore, the impact of the Syrian refugee influx to Lebanon on its state's identity must be measured through the state's discourse and actions.

From here, the two main research sub-questions are *(1) how has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted on the Lebanese state's official discourse on the national and international levels?* And *(2) how has the Syrian refugee crisis shaped the policies and behaviors of the Lebanese state on the local, national and international levels?*

In order to find out the repercussions of the Syrian refugee crisis on the Lebanese state's identity, this thesis tries to measure the potential changes of the Lebanese state's official discourse and actions. The research design is based on qualitative methods; and testing the formulated hypotheses is mostly addressed inductively. As we saw above, providing answers to the initial research sub-questions leads us to other essential questions that need to be tackled. Each question is addressed through a targeted method. Indeed, triangulation helps in finding more scientifically rigorous answers, since each method complements another (della Porta & Keating, 2008). The following paragraphs give an account of the flow.

First, a thorough review of the existing academic and scientific, social and historical literatures delivers answers to *what is identity and state identity, and what mechanisms trigger state identity to change? Does migration, specifically refugee migration, induce state identity change? Through what processes? What are the structural frames and contexts in which the Lebanese state identity is able to change?* This step helps in providing a better picture of the structure in which Lebanon's state identity can change, and in determining the actors and mechanisms that enable such change. Beyond simply delivering definitions, theoretical and structural frameworks, this step leads to the formulation of concepts. In fact, prior to measuring the *"how-much"*, research should define the *"what-is"* through the process of concept formation (Mair, 2008, p. 184).

After the literature review, the thesis focuses on giving a holistic presentation of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. Here again, the research uses a combination of methods. An initial step consists of contextualizing the Syrian refugees through a historical tracing of previous migrations in Lebanon. Then, it provides a multi-level description of Syrian refugees and their situation through numbers. Afterwise, it complements the description by presenting the empirical findings and observations harvested during field research in the Akkar Governorate, North Lebanon, that was conducted in 2019.

A third step consist of linking the empirical findings about the causes, drivers and patterns of Syrian refugees' migration with the existing migration and refugee theories found in the literature. This investigation gives an additional sub-finding to this study through a deductive theorization effort. It answers to *how Syrian refugees in Lebanon fit under theories of migration and refugee studies?*

It is only after these steps that the thesis attempts to measure the impact of the Syrian refugee influx on the Lebanese state's identity through its official discourse and actions. Each of the two main research sub-questions are analyzed separately through adapted methods. This is done through four distinct phases. The first phase redefines the structural frameworks under which the process of identity change can happen. The research reasserts how Lebanese legal, constitutional, systemic and political structures delimit the frames in which identity change mechanisms can or cannot take place. It also identifies how these mechanisms are revealed through content, contestation and action. The second phase uses some aspects of the cognitive mapping methodology in order to situate the positions about Syrian refugees of the most important political actors who can influence the identity shift of the Lebanese state. The third phase tries to interpretate how the mechanisms of change might be reflected on the state identity. The fourth phase consists of adopting the methodologies for answering the two research sub-questions.

For question *(1) How has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted on the Lebanese state's official discourse on the national and international levels?* The chosen methods are discourse analysis mixed with some basic content analysis. For the national level, it chooses 8 ministerial statements that were issued by cabinets upon their appointments between 2005 and 2020. The choice for these texts is justified along the analysis by showcasing how ministerial declarations are the result of consensus and tough negotiation between the main influential political actors. For the international level, the choice goes for fifteen of the annual speeches delivered by the President of the Republic at the United Nations General Assembly, from 2005 to 2020. This is justified also by the regularity – thus comparable - and the high importance of these allocutions that reflect on the official image and the discursive position that the Lebanese state wants to convey towards the international community about itself.

For question *(2) How has the Syrian refugee crisis shaped the policies and behaviors of the Lebanese state on the local, national and international levels?* The adopted method is process tracing. The analysis tries to understand how the Lebanese state's behaviors are reflected on an identity shift through the influence of the mapped political actors. This analysis is done by using process tracing by providing alternative explanations for the state's behavior (or inaction) on the local, national and international levels.

Chapter 2: Literature Review of State Identity

The extensive review on *state identity*, lead us to draw some conclusions and to think of the potential implications that the literature gives us in relation to the thesis' topic. These implications and conclusions are articulated below under a set of points:

- *State identity* has a domestic dimension that is constructed through a process called *nation-building*. Various actors create and imagine a *nation*. *Nationalism* is the movement that tries to impose the constructed nation as the common *national identity* of the society which is, if successful, adopted by the state itself.
- Nation-building is particularly challenging to be achieved in *fragile states*, where it is difficult to construct a common national identity that unites all segments of their plural societies. fragile states have competing identities that constantly question the legitimacy of the state.
- *State identity* has also an international dimension. It is conceptualized by constructivist international relations theories in relation with other notions such as norms, behaviors, interests and context. In this respect, constructivists believe that state identity determines the state's interests, which in turn, determine the state's *behaviors*. These behaviors must be in line with the state's interiorized *norms*. If not, *identity* must be changed through challenge or negotiation. *Norms* define the nature of *interests*.
- *State identity* is mainly determined by *culture*. Religion, ethnicity, tribal links and kinship are all parts of the culture. Hence, they are by extrapolation determinants of *state identity*.
- Actors of identity are various: some are domestic, other are international. State actors are other states or the state's elites, while non-state actors are other states' societies, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, local non-governmental organizations, civil society, political parties and media. Some of these actors are proactive in identity construction. They are labelled as *entrepreneurs* of identity. Entrepreneurs act by either promoting or challenging existing identities.
- *Identity* is changed by different actors through two possible paths, depending on the nature of these actors. In this respect, state identity changes in a *top-down* or a *bottom-up* ways. We refer to these as *identity from above* and *identity from below*.

- *State identity* changes mostly throughout the discourse. It includes the various discourses of the state's elites and official statements as well as the meanings that these discourses give to words and concepts. In fact, the real power of discourse lays in its power to build, perpetuate, change or deconstruct the national identity (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999). Emotions are also considered as factors of identity change.
- Studying identity *change* is extremely important since it has a direct impact on the state's behaviors, which are then altered or changed (Hagstrom & Gustafsson, 2015). Therefore, *actions* reflect on identity change.
- *State identity change* is bounded by the state's domestic and international structures. Actors can have an impact on identity in particular *contexts* when the structure is weak enough to allow such alterations. Thus, the weak institutional structures defining fragile states allow change to happen.
- *State identity* is tightly linked to *state security*. The relational linkage resides in the state's perception of a given *threat*, and how this threat is reflected in its discourse or mitigated in its actions and policies (*behaviors*, that are determined by *interests*, that are determined by *identity*).
- Immigration can be perceived either positively or negatively by actors who determine the interests of the state. A negative perception implies that immigration is considered a threat. This threat must therefore appear in the state's discourse or behaviors.

Now that the concepts and mechanisms are clearly presented as explained by the theory, time has come to understand and present the Lebanese state identity and the story of its formation along its determinants, actors, entrepreneurs as well as the structural and contextual frames in which it evolves. The next chapter is dedicated to this particular task.

Chapter 3: The Lebanese Identity

Through the review of the Lebanese nation-building process, this chapter enlightens us on the different actors and narratives that shaped the Lebanese identity. It also provides us with a deeper understanding of what determines genuinely identities in Lebanon. It showcases the Lebanese political system which seems to be quite fragile, since based on a precarious sectarian status quo

in which any demographic change is perceived as a threat. Finally, we have to list below some of the major implications that allow us in grasping the problematic of the next chapters, namely, the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on the Lebanese state's identity. In this respect, the most noteworthy points are the following:

- The Lebanese national construction evolved through different phases. At each stage, it adapted to the various contexts which structured its content.
- Each phase is characterized by the presence of particular actors who promoted their visions as *entrepreneurs* of identity. When their ideas were imposed and broadly accepted, they altered the national identity. When adopted by the state, the altered official identity was imposed through a top-down mechanism on the society
- Actors and entrepreneurs of the Lebanese identity managed to impose, negotiate or adapt *their* vision for *their* Lebanon on the state throughout modern history.
- In contrast, the nation-building process witnessed the emergence of other actors who contested the mainstream Lebanese national identity. They based their rejection on their own competing narratives The main competing narratives were Arab and Syrian nationalisms, leftist and progressist movements, and more recently, Islamism(s) such as Hezbollah.
- The main determinants of Lebanese identity are sectarianism and tribalism. These are coupled with other cultural and exogenous determinants.
- Concerning the end result, namely the Lebanese political system: *consociational democracy* is a unique type of governance, in which *consensualism* reflects on the fact of seeking for political *consensus*. In Lebanon, religious *confessions* are the segments that works as *consociations* within the political system.
- *Consociationalism* leans on four main principles: grand coalition, mutual veto, proportionality and relative autonomy of the sects.
- The allocation of sectarian quotas is linked to the demographic weights of the respective religious communities. Therefore, any major change in the demographic balance between sects would lead to the questioning of the status quo. This fear makes confessions to perceive any demographic change as an existential threat.

The next chapter elaborates in details on the Syrian refugee crisis that seems at this point to be a logical candidate of a perceived existential threat.

Chapter 4: The Syrian Refugee Crisis

This chapter focuses on describing the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon in a comprehensive way. It starts by inserting the crisis in its context, namely Lebanon's migration patterns both inflows and outflows. Afterwise, it tries to present all aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis with numbers and facts. Finally, the chapter gives an account of the many findings harvested during a field research study in Akkar, North Lebanon. Below are the chapter's main implications.

Contextualizing Syrian Refugees

Lebanon is both a country of emigration and immigration. Migratory flows were constituted of various groups which enjoy a set of different treatments. Treatments reflect on motives, which in turn inform us on the Lebanese state's perceived interests.

Regarding the outflows from Lebanon, the country witnessed five major waves of emigration, while a sixth one is currently in the making. These waves teach us that:

- The Lebanese diaspora's size is substantial regarding the size of the country.
- Speculation around religious identity of emigrants plays an undeniable role regarding the domestic political balance of power through the potential leverages that it can bring in the state's sectarian status quo based on demographic weights of each religious community.
- Including Christian emigrants in the Census of 1932 by the back-then Maronite political elite is the best illustration for the important links between migration and state identity in Lebanon.
- While citizenship is accorded through patrilineal *jus sanguinis* principles, ad hoc decisions, based on confessional considerations, can be made for naturalization.

On another hand, the review of the inflows towards Lebanon informs us about the state's motives. In this respect, the state's attitudes towards different immigrating groups are potentially based on its perceived interests, which are in turn reflecting on the state's identity. Immigrant groups can be categorized according to three main legal statuses. Each one reveals some important implications:

- The first category includes those who were granted Lebanese citizenship. This includes Armenians, Christians, and wealthy Muslim Palestinians. For that, the Maronite elite pushed towards the Christian predominance of Lebanon. With the end of the civil war, Christian power regressed compared to Muslim Sunni and Shia power. Their elites pushed towards naturalizing (1) Sunni non-Palestinian stateless (such as Kurds and Bedouins in the 1994 decree), and (2) Shia Palestinians of the seven villages.
- The second category regroups refugee immigrants. In this regard, Lebanon did not ratify the 1951 Convention on Refugees and its Protocol in order to avoid "*tawtin*", naturalization of Palestinian refugees. Moreover, Palestinians remained a taboo and a cement for Lebanese national identity. Furthermore, denying their access to Lebanese citizenship was integrated into the constitution.
- The third category refers to economic immigrants. Here again, the *kafala* system proves the will of the state in maintaining its identity through its religious demographic status quo. Indeed, *kafala* is a way of containing any prolonged settlement of migrant groups.

Refugees in Numbers and Facts

The following bullet points summarize key facts and figures on Syrian refugees in Lebanon that are relevant for the thesis's analysis:

- Facts and numbers show the real magnitude of the crisis. No wonder if the crisis has an impact and is perceived as a threat by Lebanon. This would be the same in any other country around the globe if faced with this magnitude.
- The diverging estimations of refugees are linked to many factors. The most interesting one is definitely the diversity of Syrian refugee population: some are economic migrants, other are strictly refugees, while some others continue to keep links with Syria or commute regularly between both countries.
- Refugees' religious affiliation is overwhelmingly Sunni Islam. It somehow legitimates the assumption that perceives them as constituting an existential threat to Lebanon. Its logic can be based on what was developed in first section by extrapolating the Palestinian case about how Lebanon dealt with this population.

- Regarding the geographical distribution of refugees, we can conclude the followings: (1) Syrians are settling mainly in bordering regions at the periphery of Lebanon, but also everywhere around the country, and in some places, they outnumber local residents. (2) This means that the public opinion, and therefore, potentially, the political actors and elites, would be deeply concerned by their issue. (3) Especially that this population is very deprived and living in precarious conditions (housing types for instance). Also, many do work, so they can be perceived as an economic threat on some Lebanese citizens.
- When it comes to their legal status: as expected, Lebanon deals with this population as it did in the past with other populations. The state is still not adhering to the Refugee Convention, refers to Syrian refugees as "*nazih*" rather than "*laji*"", and regulates their presence through expansive residency permits or *kafala*. It results in the prominence of a clandestine and illegal status for the majority of Syrian refugees.
- Concerning the observed causes and drivers, Lebanon is relatively near, easily accessible (even for clandestine migration), shares the same culture, language, religion, and in some cases, Lebanese and Syrians share kinship, tribal and family ties.

Akkar Case Study

Findings from Akkar fieldwork confirm what was found in the literature, and give some crucial insights and additional information. These can be summarized under the following few points:

- Syrian refugees in Akkar are a diverse population with various sociocultural, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Each behaves differently as for their settlement patterns, conditions and organization.
- Preestablished economic and social structures are key for refugees in determining the settlement location and type. Those who already worked somewhere before, bring in their families. Those who were from urban backgrounds tend to live in better conditions, even if in tented settlements. Those who have nomadic origins resign to tents more easily.
- Host communities have various perceptions and relationships with refugees. These can go from extremely negative (economic exploitation, political contradictions) to very positive, up to family kinship ties and even mixed marriages. This depends obviously on the economic and cultural outcomes provided by the refugee situation.

- Syrian refugees are suffering from structurally unorganized crisis management characterized by the absence of the central state.
- Various stakeholders and actors, either local, regional or international (such as NGOs) either try to help or profit from the situation.
- Here again, refugees are vulnerable and resorting to clandestine illegality in regard of their legal status. This causes a limited mobility since they risk arrest or detention. The situation reduces their access to services such as education and healthcare.
- The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees in Akkar expressed deep concerns regarding the eventuality of returning to Syria any time soon.
- Most come from adjacent Syrian regions, mainly Homs Hama and Idlib. These regions witnessed heavy fights and are close to Akkar.

Last but not least, the empirical observations harvested on the field seems to corroborate the findings revealed earlier through desk research.

Chapter 5: Redefining Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

This chapter reviews the theoretical literature of migration and refugee studies in order to better frame the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. The gathered data, findings and analysis lead us undoubtably to reshape the definition of the Syrian refugees of Lebanon. The following few paragraphs elaborate on this particular question through a set of logical steps.

We saw that the definition of *refugee* is based on the uncritical acceptance by some academics of the UN refugee convention's understanding. But by digging more into it, we found that this definition is nonetheless a construction which cannot be taken for granted by essence. So, the idea stating that the UNHCR definition might be inaccurate or not adapted for refugee studies is our first starting point upon which this redefinition can be built. From this statement, we go further by questioning the mentioned *methodological nationalism* which considers the nation-states as the main territorial recipients for migrants (cf. King, 2012). Also, we can acknowledge that the distinction between a "refugee" and an "economic migrant" is very thin and blurred. This is due to migrants' mixed motivations. Finally, typological dichotomies such as regular/irregular or

internal/international must be deconstructed, since they are only useful up to a certain point and are broken down in practice (cf. King, 2012).

Taking all these points into account, as well as the definitions from the literature review up until the last paragraphs of this chapter, the proposed revised definition for the Syrian refugees of Lebanon is the concept of "***internationally displaced persons***". According to this new concept, Syrians might be better described as being internally displaced persons who happened to cross an international border, namely towards Lebanon, rather than being simple refugees. This novel concept can be justified by four major assumptions that are developed below.

First, a refugee is a person that has crossed an international border. But beyond the constructed methodological nationalism, Syrians have crossed a very blurry, not well controlled and not precisely drawn international border that characterizes the border line between Lebanon and Syria. Furthermore, the two states have a low level of control on their borders, which is one of the main attributes of a centralized strong territorial sovereignty. In turn, the state's territorial sovereignty is the cornerstone of the nation-state from a Westphalian perspective. This is due to the erosion of the state's institutions in a war-torn Syria, and the fragility of the Lebanese state. Moreover, the fluidity in which both irregular and regular cross-border refugee migration was done, especially in the first few years, was maybe higher than mobility within Syria itself, where people face restrictions since they must cross a considerable amount of state and non-state actors' checkpoints for domestic commuting, if any. These assumptions might need further research in the future. But it seems pertinent to think that a refugee who is escaping from a rebellious region would rather choose Lebanon than another Syrian region ruled by the regime's forces, or even other rebels.

Second, according to their respective official definitions, both refugees and IDPs can be escaping violence, persecution or conflict. But IDPs might have some extra reasons to do so as well. Syrians have mixed motivations to flee away from war-torn regions in Syria. As we saw it earlier throughout this chapter, this can be a combination of various environmental, economic, security, political or even social drivers. Thus, they can't be confined under the essentialist UNHCR definition of a refugee. In other words, some Syrian refugees are only staying in Lebanon because they were already working in the country before the conflict, or found alternative sources of income, despite having the opportunity for a safe return. Therefore, in many cases, the choice of

Lebanon is only linked to their aspirations and capabilities and might be far from the strict UNHCR definition of refugees.

Third, refugees are internationally entitled to seek legal protection from host countries, while IDPs actually fall under the same jurisdiction as their local compatriots and may not claim for additional rights. Despite the fact that Syrians are recognized internationally as being refugees, there are three main reasons that falsify this label in practice. First, not all of the Syrian refugees of Lebanon are registered as such by the UNHCR. As a result, a lot of them are simply unrecognized of being refugees, even on an international level. Second, as it will be shown in the next chapter, the Lebanese state does not recognize Syrian refugees as such: it refers to them as "*nazihun*", displaced, rather than "*laji'un*", refugees (Janmyr, 2017; Kikano, Fauveaud, & Lizarralde, 2021). This unrecognition is not only explained by the unwillingness of the Lebanese state of potentially risking its demographic sectarian status quo. In fact, as it was analyzed by Kikano & Lizarralde (2022), it can also be explained by the nature of the relations between the two states. In this regard, the Lebanese foreign policy does not strictly recognize that Syria is in a state of war, hence, the displaced population cannot be considered as refugees[1]. Third, a significant proportion of the refugee population is still falling under the same jurisdiction of their Syrian compatriots who stayed in Syria without discrimination. In other words, they are equally "protected" by the Syrian state's authorities, of course to some extends, maybe even better than some of the IDPs who actually do fear their own regime. Many continue to have a good relationship with the Syrian regime, and have a perception of safety compared to other rebel or terrorist groups. We have seen how some Syrian Christians refuse to register as refugees because of their ties or interests that they have with the Syrian regime, despite being living in Lebanon. Some Syrians are still sticking to their governmental jobs and they even get paid for it. This comes of course as a clear contradiction to the mainstream definitions of both refugee and IDP. In addition, a lot of Syrians do cross the Syrian-Lebanese borders periodically, or go back and forth between the two countries quite often. These segments cannot be strictly considered as refugees as the word is internationally defined. The ultimate evidence for this would be the Syrian presidential elections during which a substantial number of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon voted for Assad. Although being a very controversial

[1] See in this respect Kikano & Lizarralde (2022) who link this policy to the agendas of some of the lebanese state's actors who are allied with the Syrian regime. These actors influence the foreign policy and design the relationship that official Lebanon must have with Syria.

election, a lot of Syrian "refugees" voted in their Beirut-based embassy during the last two Syrian presidential elections of 2014 and 2021 (Atassi, 2014; Taylor, 2014; Chehayeb, 2021; Sewell, 2021). Many of them demonstrated their sympathy to the regime by holding pictures of the president and flags, and by flooding the streets leading to their embassy.

Fourth and finally, patterns of behavior between Syrian refugees in Lebanon are very similar to those of Syrian IDPs who moved within Syria. Lebanon and Syria share together a common history, but also common cultural, linguistic and religious traits. Sometimes they even share extended trans-border family ties. Intermarriage and family unions are also very common in some groups. In this regard, a row anthropological reasoning leads us to state that in some cases, a lot of Syrian refugees do not even gasp the notion of border anyway: they flew to a village or a region (which are *translocal* spaces), that happened to be on the other side of an international border. The most flagrant illustration for this would be the case of Syrian Dom communities who are also marginalized irrespectively of being physically in Lebanon or in Syria. Many of them are stateless as well (Siren Associates and UNHCR, 2021). Some of them are almost unaware of the concept of international borders or citizenship. They just moved from one region to another, despite being part of another country in the constructed imagination of the majority.

All these elements give a flagrant legitimacy for the proposed "internationally displaced person" novel notion. Of course, we must be fully aware of the limitations of such a demarche. The used conceptual frame inspired by the works of Giddens and O'Reilly is far of being perfect and uncritical. One can mention here among others the critics of Bakewell (2010; as cited in King, 2012) towards the dangers of a potential "structure-agency impasse" (King, 2012, p.28). But this analysis can be considered as a contribution in the deconstruction of academically outdated essentialist connotations given to the understanding of *refugee*, as well as to the causes, drivers and patterns of migration and settlement as previously developed.

Last but not least, it is important to explicitly say that none of these statements undermine or underestimate the suffering and the persecutions encountered by both the Syrian people and the Lebanon-based Syrian refugees. Beyond the tragic humanitarian situation, this study is only the reflection of an abstract new definition that conceptualizes the realistic concrete scientific observations of this population's status, and questions the pre-established official definitions of

refugees and IDPs. This reflection might be helpful in future implementations of better policy response towards refugee groups in the region and around the world.

Chapter 6: The State Discourse and Actions

This chapter measures the Lebanese state's identity change through its discourse and actions. It starts by reminding some key historical elements that are crucial for the analysis. This covers the Palestinian refugee crisis and its impact on Lebanon, as well as the general context preceding the Syrian refugee crisis. In a next step, the chapter maps the stances of the main influential political parties regarding Syrian refugees. All of these allow the analysis of the state's discourse and actions.

First, the Palestinian precedent informs us that:

- the rejection of "*tawtin*" by the political elite had three discursive forms: (1) a constant reconfirmation of the right to return (even among Sunnis), (2) a rhetoric that stressed on the unbearable economic burden that they constitute, (3) an objection based on historical and political arguments drawn from the past experiences
- Also, the post-Taef Lebanese *consociational* system built its cohesion on the systematic exclusion of the Palestinian *other* for the sake of preserving Lebanese distinctiveness.
- Consequently, we can consider here once again that the rigid *structure* of the Lebanese political system is key to understand the institutionalized exclusion of Palestinians at the state level.

Second, the general historical context informs us that:

- The war in Syria resulted in some major impacts on neighboring Lebanon. (1) many Lebanese started to associate terrorism to Syrian refugees, and (2) Hezbollah's declared motives of its military involvement in Syria was based on the protection of Lebanon from Sunni Takfirist terrorism.
- Hezbollah managed to impose itself gradually as the major and most influential political player on the Lebanese scene during the last 15 years.
- Resentment and fear of Lebanese concerning Syrian refugees are related to (1) economy, (2) security – through associating Syrians to terrorists – and (3) existential threat.

- The societal resentment and fear must have been translated into the stances of the Lebanese political elite.

When it comes to the mapping of the Political Parties and their different positions towards Syrian refugees:

- A key element in determining the main parties' positions is to be found in their political affiliations (Geha, 2019) between those who are allied to the Syrian regime – like Hezbollah or the FPM – and those against it – like the FM the LF or the PSP –. For example, since the de-escalation of the Syrian conflict, pro-Syrian regime parties such as Hezbollah, Amal and FPM considered that the conflict has ended, and therefore, Syrians could safely return home, at least to safe zones, and to normalize relations with Syria.
- Another key element is related to the sectarian identity of each one of the political parties. According to that, they would have different perceptions and interests regarding the Syrians.
- One of the most striking observations from this mapping resides undoubtably in the signs shown by each party for the interpretation of their popular basis's fears.

The previous steps allow the analysis to start understanding how has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted on the Lebanese state identity. When it comes to the state's official discourse, the thesis studies two main corpuses of texts: the cabinets ministerial declarations upon government formation and the presidential speeches at the UN General Assembly's yearly plenary sessions.

Concerning the State discourse:

- Identity elements remain unchanged through both corpuses. Notions and principles such as abiding by the Constitution and/or Taef, the importance of coexistence and national unity, the trenchant opposition to "*tawtin*", and the right to return for the Palestinians, constitute all together the constant *content* of the Lebanese state identity. It is to these elements of identity content that some aspects of the Syrian refugee-related issues came to be included.
- In the discourse, the Syrian crisis managed somehow to "dethrone" the Palestinian question. The valid explanation for this can be that the Syrian influx became a more imminent threat within the influential actors' threat-assessment prioritization.

- The assessment of threats made the Syrian issue to evolve in crescendo and according to the context: from a mere security and socioeconomic threat, it went up to an opposition against integration and assimilation, then to refusing any possible form of "*tawtin*", and finally, to declare the will of starting to organize proactively their return. This gradual increase is clearly appearing through the evolution of the discourse in both corpuses.
- Escalation in the discourse interacts with the given context: it is when the Syrians outnumbered the Palestinians that it became prioritized in the discourse; it is only when their presence started to be prolonged that its threat was upgraded from security/economic to existential; it is only when the international response was not perceived as enough, that the state expressed its proactivity regarding return.
- Syrian refugee-related novel identity elements were gradually imposed by the influential actors of identity. These elements entered and became embedded in the state's structure itself. The difficulties around changing or altering any of these concepts account for their deep embeddedness within the shared status quo identity.
- But new crises weaken the structure and make it easily alterable. With the influx of Syrian refugees, the discourse analysis shows us that many – if not all – of the actors had interests in defining Syrians as constituting an existential threat to the fragile sectarian demographic status quo. In other words, while most of the actors agree on common grounds such as the economic threats of the Syrian presence, some managed to impose it as an existential threat.
- Michel Aoun as a President – backed by Hezbollah – made it easier for incorporating some parts of their positions about refugees. If we cross-check it with the cognitive map, we can easily conclude that the state, through its discourses, tended to adopt their particular vision. In more concrete terms, the non-recognition of the Syrians as "real" refugees who seek asylum, and their definition as *displaced*, are part of this new identity content.
- Nevertheless, it is important to note that this novel identity content does not really challenge the older. Actually, they complete each other: both reject categorically "*tawtin*". Therefore, the new elements reaffirm and harden the old baseline elements. This point is also corroborated by the Lebanese state's attitudes towards immigrant groups throughout its modern history (cf. Chapter 4). These attitudes attested for the state's interests which were translated into creating various legal categories.

The chapter's first part concludes by providing answers to the research's first sub-question, namely *how has the Syrian refugee crisis impacted on the Lebanese state's official discourse on the national and international levels?* On both levels, the state's discourse saw a trend of escalation through time by:

(1) reprioritizing Syrian refugees as a much more important existential threat than the Palestinians;

(2) reaffirming and reinvigorating the negation of "*tawtin*" in all its forms;

(3) "normalizing" the idea of non-voluntary safe return;

(4) on the domestic level, by justifying the state's restrictive policies;

(5) and on the international level, by:

(a) exercising chantage for international aid, and by;

(b) gradually forcing a redefinition of Syrian refugees as simple voluntary displaced rather than asylum-seeker refugees. The last point provides an additional justification for our proposed new definition of Syrian refugees as being "internationally displaced persons".

The chapter's next part traces the Lebanese state's policy towards Syrian refugees since the start of their influx. It reveals that policies evolved following three different phases:

- First phase: be described as a period of "policy of no policy" or of "ostrich policy" characterized by an open-border policy. Municipalities were left on the frontline.
- Second phase: described as "policy of exclusion": restrictions in visa, installation of kafala and residency, exclusion from the job market, interdiction of building with perennial material, asked UNHCR to stop registration…
- Third phase: shift towards aggressive return policy: here again, there is no consensus among these parties on, neither the modalities, nor the timing for this return.

These phases must be understood within the peculiar context of Lebanon. In this respect, Lebanon did not sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (Janmyr, 2017; Brun, Fakih, Shuayb, & Hammoud, 2021), but abides by the principle of non-refoulement. Also, the Lebanese state's policy response is characterized by a high level of institutional ambiguity. Finally, ambiguity and lack of action

must be both put in the context of Lebanese policy-making and implementation. State's action, inaction, or bad action, must be understood within this particular frame.

Then, the policy analysis is conducted on three levels:

- The local level: the state's inaction transferred the refugees' control and management to municipalities.
- The national level:
    - Economy restriction proactively for the sake of protecting economy, limiting access to certain low-skilled jobs, imposing *kafala*.
    - Fear of *tawtin*: the most obvious one is restricting Syrian from constructing in hard material. While this is also related to the no-camp policy for the sake of security, this measure is more to be analyzed as preventing long-term settlement rather than merely security-related.
    - Policy of return: if the issue was simply a question related to security issues, the state would not try to impose return. The economic argument is also debatable here since the presence of refugees is a source of revenue for the state and society.
- The international level: here the analysis clarifies how motives are mostly economic-driven although the discourse account for the fear as well.

The policy analysis comes to a conclusion according to which the main motives behind the state's actions are related to the fear from an existential threat through demographic imbalance of the sectarian status quo. The validation of such an alternative explanation through process tracing is based both on evidences and interpretation, allowed by the interpretivist nature of the thesis. Indeed, constructivism considers that behaviors are guided by intentions that in turn can be interpreted in order to understand identity. The validity of this explanation can be proven through two main elements. First, the recurrence of this interpretation through the various analyses found in the literature give to this explanation additional authority. Second, the intersectional reading of the main empirical evidences seems to corroborate this particular scenario. In other words, even if not enough for explaining each action or policy by its own, it is maybe the only explanation that can be interpreted as a valid one across all actions of the Lebanese state.

From here, the chapter's second part gives answers to the second research sub-question, namely *how has the Syrian refugee crisis shaped the policies and behaviors of the Lebanese state on the local, national and international levels?* The answer for this question is straightforward. From an initial "ostrich policy", the state evolved towards a "policy of restriction", then escalated later towards trying to implement policies of return. On the local level, the state did not adopt any policy. Hence, municipalities and local communities had to deal with the crisis by their own. On the national level, the state issued and tried to implement some of its restrictive policies in many different sectors. Some of these sectors are economy-related such as the regulation of the labor market, some others are security related, such as the no-camp policy. Almost all of these policies can be interpreted as driven to some extent by the perception of refugees as constituting an actual threat to the sectarian status quo demographic fragile balance. Finally, on the international level, the Lebanese state acted as a "refugee rentier state" by using chantage in order to attract international aid.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 led us to understand what defines *identity* and *state identity*. For *identity*, we have seen that constructivists consider it as constructed, changing, multiple and malleable. *Interests* are the reflection of identities in particular *contexts*. We have also learned that states have interests that are reflected through their *discourses* and *actions*. *Actions* cannot contradict the *content* of their identity. If so, *identity* must be reconstructed. *Identity* changes through *challenge* or *negotiation* within the state's *structure*. State identity is tightly linked to *security* through the state's perception of *threats*, such as in the different *other* (immigrant or refugee) for example.

Chapter 3 informed us that the *structure* of the Lebanese state is based on *confessional consociationalism* in which *actors* of Lebanese identity can *change* the state's identity through *negotiation* based on *consensus*. Also, this structure is relatively *fragile*, since based on a *sectarian status quo* determined by the demographic weights of each community. Therefore, both the Lebanese society and actors perceive demographic change as an existential *threat* to their state's identity.

Chapter 4 let us realize the complexity and gravity of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. Furthermore, the historical contextualization of this crisis allowed us to understand more the motives behind the Lebanese state's policies towards various migration inflows to the country. These motives are determined by the state's interests which perceive immigration – especially when Muslim Sunni in majority – as a *threat* for its *fragile* balance. Hence, the massive inflow of Syrian refugees can be interpreted as a potential threat in this regard. Empirical evidences from the literature and the field attest about this.

Chapter 5 and 6 showed us how the definition of *refugee* in migration and refugee theories is not compatible for the description of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon as a constructed category by the Lebanese state. In this respect, the perceived *threat* of their potential resettlement, "*tawtin*", pushed the Lebanese state to refer to them as *displaced*. This was corroborated by the analysis of the state's discourse and its refugee-related policies. It led us to redefine the Syrian refugees of Lebanon as *internationally displaced persons*.

Finally, Chapter 6 showed us how the Syrian refugees have shaped the Lebanese (1) official discourse and (2) its actions and policies. In this regard, we can clearly conclude that while the

refugees did provoke a change in the state's discourse and actions, this change was more or less in line with the content and interests of the "preexisting" Lebanese state's identity. To be more specific, the original content of the Lebanese identity, based on the interest of preserving the sectarian status quo at any cost, was neither altered nor challenged by the Syrian refugees. The discourse and actions of the state were readapted to address the Syrian refugees who were perceived as a threat. It made the state to reassess its threats by prioritizing Syrians over Palestinians as a more imminent threat for its identity. Both the rhetoric of its discourse and the deep motives behind its policies prove this trend.

So, *how has the Syrian refugee crisis affected or shaped the Lebanese state identity?*

Most of the answer is situated in the last paragraph. First, it is important to note that the Syrian refugee crisis obviously did have an impact on the Lebanese state identity. Since discourse and actions reflect on identity, the clear shift in the discourse as well as in the policies reveal that the identity was impacted. Second, for the modalities if this impact, the simple answer is that the Lebanese state identity, based on some strongly embedded elements of content in its structure, was reinforced and reaffirmed. The content had incorporated through decades consensual concepts such as *coexistence*, *power-sharing*, or the strict opposition to any type of "*tawtin*". And these concepts were constantly reaffirmed and institutionalized through the National Pact, the Taef and Doha Agreements. Neither the discourse nor the actions present elements of contestation or challenge for these core concepts. On the contrary, they almost go beyond the "minimal required". Therefore, we can conclude that the Lebanese state identity, although fragilized by the developments, and sometimes questioned by some actors, was reaffirmed by the Syrian refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, the problem remains elsewhere. The Syrian presence, if prolonged, will definitely have a different impact on Lebanon. With a deeply deprived mass living in poor conditions, coupled with the current economic and financial crisis that shake the country, the Syrian refugees are unfortunately a social "time-bomb". The upcoming years will feed us more about that.

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