Governing Displacement in the Middle East: From Vulnerability to Resilience?

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"Your idea of what resilience...[is] might not necessarily be theirs." [1]

The concept of 'resilience' has undergone a rapid rise to prominence in the past two decades, and humanitarianism is no exception. Humanitarian actors have traditionally framed their target groups as victims of war, displacement, or disaster. But the ever-growing infusion of the logics of self-improvement and individualized responsibility into all spheres of life and governance, combined with funding shortages and a sense of multiplying crises across the world, has brought to the fore a new, different vision of humanitarianism. Resilience humanitarianism calls for "nothing short of [a] global paradigm shift." [2] It is variously argued that this entails focusing on prevention, incorporating new actors, pro-actively engaging with systemic reform, and empowering individuals and communities. [3] It requires a shift of mindset, in which events are no longer seen as 'normal' or 'exceptional,' but rather in which institutional actors as well as individuals are permanently exposed to the risk of unexpected shocks, which they need to be enabled to cope with or bounce back from. According to this logic, in contexts of displacement, resilience is to be built by both 'humanitarian' and 'development' actors identifying "layers of vulnerability". Vulnerability is thereby established as the opposite of resilience and the basis for building it. [4]

This article looks at the significance of resilience narratives in displacement contexts, focusing on the response to Syrian displacement in the Middle East. It argues that while the response has adopted these broader features of resilience humanitarianism, it has also evolved in peculiar ways to make it fit with the exigencies of different international as well as host country agencies. Focusing on the Jordanian example, it particularly looks at how resilience and vulnerability have been conceptually intertwined but have nonetheless followed independent trajectories and played different functions in the everyday practices of the refugee response.

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[1] Interview with former UNHCR worker in Za'tari Refugee Camp, Jordan, via Skype, February 2016
[2] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Scott-Smith, Tom. 'Paradoxes of Resilience: A Review of the World Disasters Report 2016: Assessment: World Disasters Report 2016'. *Development and Change* 49, no. 2 (2018): 669.
[3] Hilhorst, Dorothea. 'Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of Two Brands of Humanitarian Action'. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–12; Scott-Smith, 'Paradoxes of Resilience'.
[4] Scott-Smith, 'Paradoxes of Resilience'. 668.

Resilience and the Delegation of Responsibility

The infusion of the new buzzword 'resilience' into responses to displacement came not only from neoliberal rationalities that have come to infuse humanitarianism more widely,[5] but also in the context of the three 'durable solutions' - voluntary return, full host-state integration and third-state resettlement - appearing increasingly unviable for many displaced people. Long term 'care and maintenance' programs, it is argued, cannot continue indefinitely, and so refugees must be equipped to cope with crisis independently, including with crises yet to come.[6]

This focus can be seen as the latest in the long line of deployments (and re-inventions) of the refugee self-reliance agenda, yet resilience humanitarianism aims to be both wider and deeper than just self-reliance.[7] While self-reliance is typically understood in humanitarian circles as the ability to support oneself, resilience humanitarianism purports to involve a more fundamental change in the relationship between 'helpers' and 'beneficiaries.' Displaced people are deemed to be (capable of being) 'survivors' and 'first responders,' able to fend for themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, and able to bounce back from crisis.[8] They must still be assisted, but to eventually become resilient;[9] resilience must thus be generated from their vulnerability.[10]

Resilience humanitarianism also envisages a change of role for actors other than displaced people. It promotes the increased involvement of 'local' (read: 'non-international') agencies in the delivery of humanitarian services, and closer coordination between humanitarians, host governments and non-governmental organizations.[11] Although donor preferences continue to shape the contours of humanitarian work, resilience humanitarianism claims to strive for more 'local ownership' over the humanitarian response.[12] Arguably, anchoring refugee responses in local institutions and processes also allows humanitarian actors to move attention and resources more easily from one crisis to another, while maintaining government from a distance.[13] At the same time, foregrounding local institutions and their capacities allows international actors to make their local partners responsible for the success of the refugee response, while potentially reducing the focus on their own roles in crisis management, and the roles of donor countries in creating those crises.

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[5] Ilcan, Suzan, and Kim Rygiel. '"Resiliency Humanitarianism": Responsibilizing Refugees through Humanitarian Emergency Governance in the Camp'. *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 4 (2015): 333–51; Neocleous, Mark. 'Resisting Resilience'. *Radical Philosophy: Journal of Socialist Feminist Philosophy* 178 (2013): 2–7.

[6] Easton-Calabria, Evan, and Naohiko Omata. 'Panacea for the Refugee Crisis? Rethinking the Promotion of "Self-Reliance" for Refugees'. *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1458–74.

[7] Krause, Ulrike, and Hannah Schmidt. 'Refugees as Actors? Critical Reflections on Global Refugee Policies on Self-Reliance and Resilience'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33, no. 1 (2020): 22-41.

[8] Hilhorst, 'Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism'.

[9] Krause and Schmidt. 'Refugees as Actors?'.

[10] Turner, Lewis. 'The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men as "Vulnerable"'. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* online first (2019): 1-23.

[11] Hilhorst, 'Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism'.

[12] Anholt, Rosanne and Wagner, Wolfgang. 'Resilience in the European Union External Action'. In E. Cusuman & S. Hofmeier (Eds.), *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*. Cham: Palgrave, 2020.

[13] Anholt, Rosanne. 'Resilience in Practice: Responding to the Refugee Crisis in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon'. *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 4 (2020): 294–305; Haldrup, Søren Vester, and Frederik Rosén. 'Developing Resilience: A Retreat from Grand Planning'. *Resilience*, 1, no. 2 (2013): 130-145.

Rolling out Resilience in the Syrian Refugee Response

Resilience was first used as a strategic frame in humanitarian operations in the context of (natural) disaster relief. But it was the regional response to Syrian displacement to Syria's neighboring states that really provided the test case for resilience thinking in displacement contexts, and that has served to firmly establish resilience as a rallying cry for refugee responses. Until 2014, this response was a relatively straightforward humanitarian one, with little involvement of host governments, local institutions, or consideration of medium-term development needs of the hosting countries or the refugee populations in them. Yet a reorganization of language and forms of intervention has since taken place, which have moved these considerations center stage. To highlight the importance of resilience in this, the organized efforts to coordinate a regional response to Syrian displacement were renamed as the '3RP' - the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans.

The promotion of resilience was based on the rationale that refugee-hosting countries in the region were middle-income countries with, in principle, the capacity to lead a refugee response. The initiative, supported heavily by the international donor community, was spearheaded by a unit within UNDP that was deliberately established in 2013 to strengthen the developmental aspect of the regional response to Syrian displacement, and with it also UNDP's role in the response. Integrating short-term emergency measures into a nationally owned and -led 'fast-track development response', it argued, would help strengthen local institutions and effectively enable them to respond to the multiple dimensions of the crisis induced by the presence of Syrian refugees. This is preferable, it claimed, to indefinitely maintaining the parallel structures created by the international emergency response. At the same time, resources and skills brought in by refugees could be harnessed to build their, as well as their hosts', resilience.[14]

Programming along these lines since 2015 has sought to link emergency assistance with activities geared towards increasing the self-sufficiency of refugee populations and host country nationals identified as vulnerable. There has been a particular focus on activities seeking to generate additional incomes and increase 'employability', strengthen existing service delivery systems, and improve institutional as well as individual capacities to manage shocks. National planning documents and structures established for this type of response are used as country chapters for the joint regional response.[15]

While many 3RP documents superficially appear like a playbook of resilience humanitarianism, in fact they leave a lot of space for different interpretations of what resilience means in practice. Lebanon country chapters over the years, for example, do not speak about refugees much, as directly targeting them is largely considered taboo by the variety of Lebanese agencies involved, and constitutes one of the few points of agreement in an otherwise deeply fragmented institutional ensemble. The Lebanon country chapter also uses the term stabilization, rather than resilience, as a

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[14] UNDG. A resilience-based development response to the Syria crisis. Position Paper. United Nations Development Group. Arab States, Middle East, North Africa, 2014; interviews with staff of SRF, July & August 2015.

[15] See e.g. MoPIC. Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2020-2022. Amman: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2020.

unifying concept, as resilience is seen as implying refugees' long-term presence in the country, which the Lebanese government deems unacceptable.[16]

This divergence between country chapters, as well as the programming resulting from them, points to a politics of resilience that includes but also goes beyond the neoliberal reframing of humanitarianism. It indicates an approach that also seeks to make the overall narrative fit with established political dynamics in each of the refugee hosting countries. Looking at specific country cases, and particularly at dynamics produced in interaction between different international and host country agencies, provides an opportunity to better gauge those politics, and thereby reveal what resilience means in practice.

Ambiguities of Resilience Programming in Jordan

The Jordanian example is a particularly pertinent context in which to explore this in more depth, as it has gone the furthest in fleshing out the resilience narrative and building it into programming. Thereby, it also demonstrates the ambiguities and creative reinterpretations that have made resilience - as well as the 'paired' concept of vulnerability - appealing and acceptable in the Jordanian context and has given both resilience and vulnerability their specific functions.

The Jordan Response Plan (JRP), the periodic nationally led planning framework for the Syria response, has strongly emphasized the adoption of a resilience-based approach in responding to refugees' presence. The humanitarian side of the response - focused on supporting (the most) vulnerable refugees - continues to be organized as a relatively self-contained institutional ensemble divided into sectors, in a structure similar to those used in other refugee responses across the world. Nevertheless, the JRP is the overarching framework under which this humanitarian, as well as more developmental, activity happens. All international as well as national agencies working on the response are required to submit funding pledges and project proposals through the JRP's online platform, and then get approval from a government-led steering committee. Thereby, a resilience-based approach has brought together humanitarian as well as development agencies, funding streams, programs and projects under a nationally led umbrella. Subsuming all this under the banner of resilience has been enabled by a number of ambiguities about resilience remaining unresolved, which has effectively allowed the response to integrate competing agendas.

To give just one example,[17] it has remained relatively ambiguous to date whose resilience needs to be strengthened and how. In the first years after its establishment, the JRP was divided into a refugee component and a resilience component. Yet what precisely these entailed remained somewhat open to interpretation. Many of the actors involved understood the refugee component to comprise projects and services that were directly and primarily addressing refugees, and the resilience

[16] Anholt, Rosanne, and Giulia Sinatti. 'Under the Guise of Resilience: The EU Approach to Migration and Forced Displacement in Jordan and Lebanon'. *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 2 (2020): 320–21; Fakhoury, Tamirace. 'Contested Meanings of Resilience Building: How Great Expectations in Brussels are Dashed in Beirut'. *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, Jul 5th, 2019. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/07/05/contested-meanings-of-resilience-building-how-great-expectations-in-brussels-are-dashed-in-beirut/.
[17] For a more in-depth discussion and other examples of such ambiguities, see Lenner, Katharina: Ambiguities of resilience. Governing Syrian Displacement in Jordan. Under review.

component to include public services provided to both Jordanians and Syrians (such as schools, health and waste management services). Others, however - implicitly or explicitly - equated the resilience component with the 'host community'.[18]

This latter interpretation is evident in a required ratio of Jordanian to Syrian beneficiaries for projects conducted under the resilience component. This ratio has increased over the years and is now 70% Jordanians vs 30% Syrians. This requirement has changed the outlook of many of the originally humanitarian NGOs working in the response, and has given their operations a more developmental twist.[19] At the same time, these ratios have in practice remained negotiable, which has allowed powerful organizations bound by their mandate to focus on refugees, and skeptical about an overly strong host country focus, to also submit projects under this component.[20]

Programming within the resilience component also took a decisive turn with the 2016 'Jordan Compact', through which Jordan has allowed Syrians to formalize their labor market participation in a limited number of sectors in return for additional grants and loans, as well as trade concessions.[21] In the wake of this change in policy, resilience-oriented programming has become strongly equated with (refugee) self-reliance, and has led to a myriad of projects geared towards increasing refugees', as well as Jordanians', employability and entrepreneurial appetite. The resilience framework and its inherent ambiguities have thus made it possible to accommodate differing priorities, as well as changes over time. The role of 'resilience' as a unifying concept has been to mediate and bridge those differences between the large number of agencies, approaches and interests involved.

Quantifying Needs Through 'Vulnerability'

Vulnerability, on the other hand, has primarily been deployed - often very generically - as a way of measuring the needs of Syrian refugees, particularly their economic needs.[22] Indeed, as UNHCR Jordan notes, while vulnerability can be understood in terms of to what one is vulnerable, in the humanitarian sector "'vulnerable and 'vulnerability' are common terms," that are "often...seen as substitutes for 'poor' and 'poverty.'"[23] In the ways that vulnerability is discussed, the institutional, social and political structures and contexts that produce refugees' 'vulnerabilities' are often sidelined or even erased. Furthermore, measurements of refugee vulnerability often exclude key contextual factors such as individuals' and families' personal histories, social capital, networks, and experiences

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[18] Interviews with staff at MoPIC, June 2015; staff of JRP secretariat, July 2015.

[19] See Schmidt, Katharina. Developmentalising Humanitarian Space: The (Anti-)Politics of International Aid for Refugees in Jordan. MA Dissertation. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2019.

[20] Recent reorganizations of the JRP structure superficially do away with differentiating refugees and resilience, and rather group Jordanians and Syrian refugees as vulnerable populations in need of resilience-oriented measures in different sectors. In practice, however, there has remained a differentiation between a 'refugee pillar' and a 'resilience pillar' for the purposes of project submission and targeting. See MoPIC. Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2020-2022; interview with UNHCR Livelihoods Officer, via Skype, March 2020

[21] See Lenner, Katharina, and Lewis Turner. 'Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labor Market in Jordan'. *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (2019): 65–95.

[22] See Turner, Lewis. Challenging refugee men: Humanitarianism and masculinities in Za'tari refugee camp. PhD thesis. London: SOAS University of London, 2018.

[23] UNHCR. Vulnerability Assessment Framework Baseline Survey. Amman: UNHCR Jordan (2015): 9; for the broader shift from poverty to vulnerability, see also Best, Jacqueline. 'Redefining Poverty as Risk and Vulnerability: Shifting Strategies of Liberal Economic Governance'. *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2013): 109–29.

of war and displacement.[24] Yet as much as designating (some) Syrian refugees as vulnerable is an assessment of their needs, it is also a mechanism through which humanitarians' work with Syrian refugees is explained and justified. It turns them into (possible) objects of intervention.[25]

In the Syria response in Jordan, the idea of vulnerability was initially centered on the 'group approach,' which listed demographic categories that were (liable to be) vulnerable, such as women at risk, elderly persons, people with disabilities. Recognizing the inadequacies of this group approach,[26] UNHCR and its partners instituted a Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF). This quantitative system, which seductively reduces the complexity of the social world through its organization and simplification of information,[27] uses proxy means testing to rank the vulnerability of Syrian refugees into categories such as 'low,' 'moderate,' high,' and 'severe.'[28] UNHCR draws a direct link between the level of refugees' vulnerability and refugees' economic self-reliance, because to generate these categories of vulnerability it deploys an econometric model (developed in partnership with the World Bank) focused on household predicted expenditure, which is closely correlated to income and economic status. The 'VAF Score' given to a refugee on this basis can be hugely impactful. Their designated level of vulnerability can determine their eligibility for cash support and ability to access a wide range of NGO services and programs.

The emphasis on reducing vulnerability and improving economic self-reliance (now increasingly termed 'economic empowerment') became even more evident following the announcement of the aforementioned Jordan Compact in 2016. Through the work permits Syrians could now obtain, and which in principle represent access to the formal labor market, many more Syrian refugees could now be expected to achieve self-reliance and alleviate their economic vulnerability, even if work permits in practice appeared to do little to improve Syrians' working conditions.[29]

The quantification drive brought about by the VAF, and the conceptual popularity of vulnerability in humanitarian circles, has brought with it attempts to similarly express Jordanian host populations' poverty in terms of vulnerability.[30] It has also led to attempts by the Jordanian government to express and quantify the need for institutional support for specific sectors through a vulnerability lens. Combined with the organization of the JRP into refugee and resilience components, this has led to convoluted articulations of the core concepts, for example to a listing of "refugee

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[24] Brun, Cathrine. 'There Is No Future in Humanitarianism: Emergency, Temporality and Protracted Displacement'. *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 393–410.

[25] Turner, 'The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men as "Vulnerable"'.

[26] Khogali, Hisham, Lynnette Larsen, Kate Washington, and Yara Romariz Maasri. 'Aid Effectiveness and Vulnerability Assessment Framework: Determining Vulnerability among Syrian Refugees in Jordan'. *Field Exchange Emergency Nutrition Network*, November 2014, 78–81.

[27] Merry, Sally Engle. *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

[28] Brown, Harry, Nicola Giordano, Charles Maughan and Alix Wadeson. Vulnerability Assessment Framework Population Study 2019. Amman: UNHCR, Action Against Hunger and International Labour Organization, 2019.

[29] Gordon, Jennifer. Refugees and Decent Work: Lessons Learned from Recent Refugee Job Compacts. Employment Working Paper. Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2019.

[30] See e.g. UNICEF. Geographic Multidimensional Vulnerability Analysis - Jordan. Amman: UNICEF, 2020. On the broader move to redefine poverty as vulnerability, see Best, 'Redefining Poverty as Risk and Vulnerability'.

vulnerabilities and needs" vs. "resilience vulnerabilities and needs".[31] Vulnerability has thus been linked with resilience in different ways, yet not as directly as envisaged in resilience humanitarianism more broadly.

The Multiple Functions of Resilience and Vulnerability

Although both resilience and vulnerability have played vital roles in the refugee response, they have assumed different functions in practice. Resilience has played more of a political function in holding together the response and balancing out the diverging agendas of various humanitarian, developmental and national governmental actors over time. Vulnerability, on the other hand, has been used to quantify and measure the needs and self-sufficiency of refugees and, to a limited degree, host communities and institutions. In contrast to the overarching vision of resilience humanitarianism, resilience and vulnerability have not functioned as straightforwardly 'paired' concepts in the refugee response in Jordan but have followed their own independent trajectories.

What has continued to unite both concepts, however, is their individualizing effects. By making populations and local institutions responsible for becoming more self-sufficient, they have jointly contributed to obfuscating the broader contexts that render this challenging. Simultaneously, both have been vital in facilitating a range of interventions in the name of turning Syrian displacement in the Middle East into an opportunity for 'improving' individuals, communities, and institutions. In the context of a worsening economy, induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and urgent and competing funding priorities, 'resilience' and 'vulnerability' may well facilitate yet another (re)invention of such interventions into the context of Jordan, and the lives of its inhabitants.

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[31] See e.g. MoPIC. Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment. Amman: MoPIC, 2016.