

Finding Resilience's Roots in Exclusion and Extraction

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Recent reports have found that at least US\$250 million in aid slated for Syrian refugees and the Lebanese poor has been [swallowed up](#) - or perhaps more accurately stolen by - the banking system in Lebanon in an effort to shore up limited, and rapidly dwindling, stock of US dollars in the country. The overwhelming majority of these funds were designated to respond to the basic needs of Syrian refugees in the country. While this latest incident comes at a time when attention on the banking sector, and its extractive mode of operation, is perhaps at its highest yet, I argue that it represents the most recent material manifestation of a long-standing pattern in the country: the *extraction from* and the *exclusion of* migrants and refugees has been a cornerstone of Lebanon's so-often heralded 'resilience.'

This resilience has been analyzed, and critiqued, in a number of ways throughout the years. While at times the referent of this characterization is (deliberately) ambiguous, we can distinguish between, at least, two broad meanings. The first is a community-level, or social, resilience. This can take many forms: psychological, social, or even economic. In a recent contribution to this series of ISJCR commentaries, Steven [Heydemann](#) points to the ways that "localized, informal, solidarity-based institutions anchored in personal relationships and social networks" help sustain social and economic resilience for the very poor in the region.

The second understanding, and which I focus on here, is more often described as 'state-based' resilience, one that is more common in the field of Political Science and focuses on the ability of a state – understood as the institutions and/or the governing structure – to seemingly weather a wide array of disruptions and avoid the dreaded 'collapse' or 'failure'.

As Jamil [Mouawad](#) has argued, in the case of Lebanon, this discourse has most often translated into the resilience of the 'system' rather than the 'state,' as the existing governing structure actively works to strengthen private interests and clientelist practices, at the expense of state institutions. Here, I draw on Mouawad's argument, and look at two sets of dynamics through which resilience of the system has been maintained: first, the exclusion and scapegoating of migrant and refugee populations, and second, extraction from these same groups in the form of low-wage labour and international rent-seeking. In this brief contribution, I sketch each of these dynamics separately to show how Lebanon's political and

economic system has, both historically and in the contemporary period, been reliant on them to maintain itself.

EXCLUSION

That migrants and refugees in Lebanon are structurally excluded in the country is beyond contention. To speak of only the main axes of exclusion: Palestinian refugees in the country have, for generations, been excluded spatially, socially, and economically – not to mention politically – from full participation in Lebanese society,¹ [Syrian refugees](#), over the last decade, have become increasingly ‘othered’ even in areas where strong kinship ties and shared ties challenge notions of foreignness, and, finally, the exclusion of migrant domestic workers has, as anthropologist Summayya [Kassamali](#) states, “produce[d] a set of local social hierarchies that cannot be reduced singularly to questions of race, gender, labor or nationality [... and a system that produces] a society in which certain kinds of people are understood to exist only to do certain kinds of work.”

This exclusion, and the social processes of ‘othering’ that it enabled, facilitated Lebanese political elites’ reliance on scapegoating in times of political and economic crisis. While the extent to which it effectively protected political elites from popular criticism is contested,² it is clear that it marked the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon at both a macro and micro level since very early on. Syrians were blamed for everything from the [decrease in GDP growth in the country](#), the [garbage crisis and water pollution](#), [electricity shortages](#), [increasing unemployment and economic stagnation](#), as well as the [“spread of cancer”](#) and the [increase in divorce rates](#) in the country.

In the case of [water](#) governance, which has been a major area of concern since at least the early 2000s, Lebanese authorities had previously focused on the role of external actors, such as Israel, in the destruction and pollution of key resources and infrastructure to shift public attention from government mismanagement. However, the arrival of Syrian refugees heralded a shift from a “regional blame-model” to a “domestic blame-model” focused on [refugees](#). Critically, this was not limited to particular political parties but cut across political lines, and included [politicians from the Future Movement](#) – who had been the strongest voices in support of Syrian refugees in the country in the early stages. Importantly, it aims to deflect public attention yet again from the failures of the governing class.

Similarly, statements reiterating the destabilizing political – and even violent -- potential that Syrian refugees posed echoed those heard about Palestinians previously: as Maya [Mikdashi](#) wrote, in 2017, “[t]he fears, anxieties, violence, and xenophobia that [the Syrian refugee] inspires in Lebanese political leaders (many of whom cut their political teeth in anti-Palestinian militias during the civil war) cannot be understood without attention to the experiences of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.” These ‘fears’ and

¹ The literature on this is much too vast to summarize here. However, a few important references include: Sari Hanafi, Jad Chaaban, Karin Seyfert, “Social Exclusion of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Reflections on the Mechanisms that Cement their Persistent Poverty,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 31, 1, (March 2012): 34–53; Rosemary Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (Beirut: Al-Mashriq, 2015); and Jaber Suleiman, “Refugees or Foreigners? The Case of Palestinians in Lebanon,” in Grabska K. and Mehta L., eds., *Forced Displacement: Why Rights Matter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

² See Anne Marie Baylouny, *When Blame Backfires: Syrian Refugees and Citizen Grievances in Jordan and Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

'anxieties' – repeated and recirculated in the popular narrative – serve to distance these same politicians of their own responsibilities for the war that came, and the wars that may yet come,³ while also impeding the development of a popular movement against the ruling elite that transcends boundaries of nationality, in a country where nearly a quarter of the resident population are non-nationals. As the most harrowing and recent example of this, in the aftermath of the August 2020 blast, [reports of discrimination](#) in [aid](#) against non-Lebanese were abundant, along with restrictions on the relief [efforts](#) of the Palestinian Civil Defense in Lebanon (PCDL).

EXTRACTION

In addition to its reliance on the political and social exclusion of migrants, Lebanon's resilience has also been sustained in part through extraction from these same groups. The country's economic dependence on low-wage and exploited work, and its international rent-seeking on the basis of 'hosting' of large numbers of refugees, have played an important role in sustaining the political and economic systems over the last decades.

The country's economic system has, both historically and in contemporary times, relied on and benefited from the exploitation of low-paid and exploited migrant laborers, first primarily Palestinian and Syrian workers, and later also migrant workers from Asia and Africa. As John Chalcraft has shown, already in the 1950s and 1960s, the Lebanese economy was built upon and reliant on the "mass migration of menial labor from Syria."⁴ As the preponderance of Syrian labour waxed and waned throughout the decades, particularly as it became more closely associated with the Syrian military presence in the country, and Palestinians remained geographically concentrated and segregated, the share of Asian and African workers increased in the post-war era. The type of [jobs](#) for which migrant workers were recruited also expanded, to now include care work and domestic work (what is often referred to as "reproductive labour"). By 2019, estimates placed the number of migrant domestic workers, primarily from Asia and Africa, at close to 300,000, approximately the same number of Palestinian refugees in the country.

As such, the employment of a live-in domestic worker had become a 'minimum status requirement' of the Lebanese middle classes.⁵ Taken together, the migrant labour force in the country sustained the services, construction, and agricultural industries, among others, as well as provided the means for many Lebanese to fill the many gaps, at low wages in the context of a pegged Lira, of state social provision.

In addition, the political system – particularly over the last decade – has been sustained in part through extraction of aid on the basis of the country's 'hosting' of large numbers of refugees. While the country's

³ For more on how fears and anxieties about the 'war yet to come' are (re)produced through both the actions of politicians and more broadly through the infrastructure of the city, see Hiba Bou Akar, *For The War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁴ John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009): 53.

⁵ Fawwaz Traboulsi cited in [Kassamali](#). Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2015 indicates that the overwhelming majority of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon come from three countries: Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, though Sri Lanka and Nepal are also significant source countries. See ILO, 2015, "Intertwined: The Workers' Side": A Study of Working and Living Conditions of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon," at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_524143.pdf.

'resilience' to the arrival of over one million Syrians has perhaps been heralded above all, it has depended "more on international aid and less on state policies." Since 2013, Lebanon has received over US\$1 billion in aid every year, an amount that represents over three times what the government has spent productively on the economy. The government's explicit bargaining on the basis of the loosening of certain restrictions on Syrian refugees, and at times the threat and active use of deportation, was integral to its foreign policy since 2014. The political system's direct reliance on these funds to sustain itself has become even more acute as US dollar shortages in the country became a reality over the last two years.

CONCLUSION

While the so-called resilience of Lebanon has manifold manifestations, and drivers, it is crucial to understand the ways in which exclusion and extraction were built into the system itself and facilitated its reproduction. Moreover, while often the study of Lebanon's policies towards migrants and refugees are analyzed discretely, looking at them together allows us to understand how they form part of a more complex but overlapping political economy of migration in the country. Finally, through an analysis of the dynamics that maintained the existing system, we may be better placed to understand its violence but also identify ways to effectively challenge it.