

Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East. By Zeynep Şahin Mencütek

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Comparative Lens

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Book Reviews

Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East



Zeynep Şahin Mencütek

Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019, pp. 284.

The uprising in Syria and ensuing war has resulted in the displacement of millions of Syrians since 2011, making it one of the largest drivers of mass migration in recorded history. Neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey first received and continue to host the vast majority of the refugees from this crisis. Drawing on this shared experience, Zeynep Şahin Mencütek's book examines the responses of these three host states comparatively and draws out important insights for the study of state responses to mass migration. Juxtaposing these three cases, the book proposes a distinct framework—referred to as “meta-governance” (9)—to understand how these states govern the arrival and presence of Syrians, and how their approach varies over time and across policy areas.

This comparison, the author argues, is particularly fruitful for substantive and theoretical reasons. First, the region (when including Turkey, as this book does) is the largest host and source of refugees globally. Second, the three cases allow for an examination of why—despite similar conditions—they adopt different patterns of governance. This reliance on a “most-similar research design” (11) is one of the more challenging claims of the work, as the cases under study also have substantially different starting points in state capacity, historical ties to Syria, and experience with previous refugee movements in the region. The broad patterns of governance adopted by these states are classified as inaction, ad hoc, and regulative. A fourth pattern—preventive—is identified as theoretically possible yet missing from all cases. These patterns, importantly, are not seen as fixed but rather “that it is most likely that a country will change its response partially or entirely in the course of time” (6). This combination results in what the author describes as “multi-pattern and

multi-stage governance” (6). For each country, one chapter is devoted to identifying the patterns of governance and another to the drivers of the change in patterns. The book identifies three macro-level explanations that come together in contingent and different ways in each case to explain its ultimate governance pattern: (1) international politics; (2) national security and domestic politics; and (3) factors related to the economy and development factors (57–64).

An important contribution of the book is its comprehensive exploration of three main policy choices that states face when adopting a response to mass migration: border controls, reception/protection, and integration. These choices are often studied in a segmented manner, in which scholars focus specifically on one particular policy choice or area. Such reasoning stems in part from a disproportionate focus on the Global North, where it is generally assumed—although it is increasingly not so—that access to territory provides asylum-seekers and refugees with a near-automatic set of rights and protections and a likely path towards integration. In looking at these policies in tandem, the book advances a more nuanced understanding of a state's response to mass influx that moves beyond a narrow and often binary distinction between an “open” or welcoming policy and a “closed” or restrictive policy.

Not only does the book look at a variety of policy areas, but it also aims to understand them dynamically. The author argues that the governance of mass migration is subject to at least three stages: the initial stage, the “critical juncture,” and the protracted stage (55). Here it is important to note that the book distinguishes the protracted stage of governance from the protracted nature of the displacement (which, by UNHCR's definition, is over five consecutive years). This

stage, rather than being clearly delimited by time (though in all three cases appears at around the five-year mark), is defined by the institutionalization and stabilization of policies “on the basis of the permanency of refugees” (56). This attempt to explain not only the emergence of policy but also its change over time is an important undertaking.

However, in this set of explanations the book’s argument can appear overly determined and functionalist. The “critical juncture” in Lebanon, for instance, occurred at about the time registered Syrians in the country passed the 1 million mark, where the Lebanese national authorities moved from policy paralysis, or inaction, to a central policy of restriction. This shift, as argued in the book, was driven in large part by the fact that the numbers “necessitated the government to act” (168, emphasis added), and that “the Lebanese policy makers were required to mediate negative public perceptions [of competition for labour and other sources of tension] by introducing regulative and restrictive policies that had been delayed until early 2015 due to the political stalemate” (171, emphasis added). Such analysis implicitly downplays the ways in which changes in the strength of domestic coalitions shifted, and the extent to which narratives of tension between locals and refugees were strategically mobilized and used by national leaders to justify policy options. Moreover, there is a presupposition of linearity in these stages—where a critical juncture—that states are said to reach “often in the course of three to five years”—leads to a situation where “the refugee

crisis is settled to some extent” (55). However, what we see (and the book shows) is that, even after periods of regulation, new stages of “crisis” and ad hoc policy-making can emerge. For instance, policies and practices of refugee return in all three states are neither comprehensive nor clearly dictated from the top, but rather rely on a mix of inaction and ad hoc patterns of governance, by allowing non-state or sub-state actors to facilitate and encourage return, in certain instances, and instances of state-led return are sporadic and seemingly unpredictable yet undeniable.

To conclude, *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East* is an ambitious book that advances our understanding of refugee governance in the Global South by analyzing in parallel three important cases of refugee-hosting states in the Middle East. Moreover, it helps define a framework for other scholars of migration to consider which factors Şahin Mencütek identifies—international politics, national security and domestic politics, and economic development—matter most in determining host state policies toward refugees in other regions and under what circumstances.

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