Siloed Knowledge Production in Refugee Studies

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Scholarly examinations of refugee issues often engage knowledge producers across disciplines and beyond the academy. Journalists tackle moral and political questions that are captured in news headlines. The law guides how lawyers and advocates label people who crossed a border and reinforce a boundary between refugees and other migrants. Humanitarian professionals carefully maneuver around the interests of stakeholders including influential donors and host governments.

Each of these groups offer invaluable insights that can inform scholarship, but their positions are limited by the politics of knowledge production. The journalist is incentivized to cover timely events, deprioritizing historical contexts in favor of current human-interest stories. The lawyer must be singularly focused on arguing in favor of a client's asylum claim, regardless of the implications for other migrants. The humanitarian diplomatically bends to the interests of state officials who exercise ultimate authority over access to refugees in the host country. Scholars are not limited by the responsibilities of practitioners, who depend on categories of practice over categories of analysis to achieve their goals. Although they may be constrained by their profession when making their work legible to others in the field or appealing to funding institutions, the scholar can break away from the incentives that inform reporting on popular topics, restrict transparency, and amplify the experiences of some refugee groups over others. The scholar has the independence to say things that other knowledge producers cannot.

The challenge for the scholar is to strike a balance between learning from these various knowledge producers without recreating the restrictions on the scope of their analysis, conclusions, and implications. Drawing from our recent book, *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach*, we provide an assessment of six distinct limitations that appear throughout the refugee literature—what we

call "siloed approaches"—and examine how a "systems approach" can be used to reimagine the state of displacement, expanding with examples from the MENA region.[1] We push against the above tendencies by considering how a displaced individual may see the world through interactive connections among places of origin, transit, and destination. A systems approach shows how changes in one part of the system reverberate elsewhere. Earlier migrations shape later movements. Blocked paths of mobility in one place redirect migration along other paths. Government policies today are shaped by historical legacies, behaviors of other states, and the actions of displaced people. All these processes are forged by deep inequalities of power. Scholars can miss these connections across geographies and through time because of siloed knowledge production.

The first three siloed approaches include: 1) the tendency to be ahistorical (policy and humanitarian reports); 2) the failure to explain, or the purposeful neglect of, the causes of displacement (humanitarian, especially reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]), and 3) the use of an exclusively legal definition of refugees to define the scope conditions of the study (legal approaches). Note that the critique of siloed approaches is not a moral judgement suggesting that siloed approaches are inherently illegitimate. These forms of knowledge production can be fundamental and even necessary to the work that practitioners do.

Scholars can also perpetuate siloed knowledge production in three additional ways. Following the Convention definition of a refugee, scholars may set their scope conditions

to only consider people who have crossed state borders and, in doing so, neglect those who stay home despite the threat of violence. We present this critique against our previous article (FitzGerald and Arar 2018), and broaden our analysis in *The Refugee System* to consider refugees' expansive networks across borders. Scholars may also focus too much on the UNHCR's "durable solutions" of voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement, which limits their analysis by following humanitarian objectives and ignores alternatives that include continued mobility across international borders. Finally, there is a tendency to study a single isolated stage of displacement, such as resettlement, divorced from other stages of displacement. Below we describe and explain each siloed approach and offer lessons that emerged from our examination of the benefits of a systems approach.

Silo 1: The Tendency to Be Ahistorical

Humanitarian and policy reports are written with a focus on the present. They may convey changing demographic data, contemporary social issues in host countries, including access to housing or schooling, and changes in policy. The parameters of such reports are informed by their intended audiences and can be used to fundraise and shore up goodwill. These documents are both a source of information for policymakers and donors and a justification for the work being done. Reports are often characterized by a sense of urgency, sending a clear message to donors that a timely response is needed. The most urgent refugees are portrayed as those currently in transit or those who face mortal threat in search of safe haven, even though most of the

1 For a review of refugee issues in MENA see Arar et al. (2022) and Arar (2022), which includes an extended bibliography of MENA refugee scholarship.

world's refugees have been displaced for generations and their onward movement may have stagnated. In turn, findings from such reports are shared with the public through news outlets that provide updates on the most recent displacements of pressing concern.

Scholars can be seduced by timeliness as well, and succumb to "a failure to situate the subject(s) of study in appropriate historical context or value the role of history in current events" (Arar et al. 2022). While scholars benefit greatly from engaging humanitarian and policy reports and drawing upon accounts in the media, they are not beholden to the same parameters of study. The scholar has the privilege of being able to interrogate the limits of such knowledge production, weaving these reports into the larger tapestries of knowledge that are not bounded by the politics of aid and statecraft. While humanitarian and policy-centered approaches cauterize contemporary displacements from legacies of forced displacement, war, and genocide, scholars are free to make these important connections. For example, scholars may examine ethnic and religious diversity among displaced refugees from Syria or investigate how Syrian reception in neighboring states has been shaped by previous groups of refugees by exploring the antecedents of the war in 2011.

Considering the longue durée, a systems approach maps *how earlier movements have shaped later movements*. For example, the original displacements of more than one million Palestinian refugees as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (*known as the Nakba*) and 1967 Arab-Israeli War (*known as the Naksa*) have fed into additional deportations and expulsions of Palestinians from Arab host states throughout the decades.

This includes Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Libya in the 1950s; Jordan in 1970; Libya in the mid-1990s; Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003; and Syria as a result of the war in 2011 (Rosen 2012). One striking example is Kuwait's deportation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf War, illuminating the relationship between labor migration and refugee displacement, the respective examination of which has traditionally been relegated to distinct fields of study (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). Some Palestinian refugees who could secure work in Kuwait emigrated as labor migrants. By 1990, the Palestinian population in Kuwait totaled between an estimated 400,000 and 450,000 people. During and after the Gulf War, most fled and approximately half were never allowed to return, leaving behind an estimated $33 billion in property (Rosen 2012).

Taking a systems approach exposes *how early receptions can shape later receptions*. Host governments throughout MENA drew upon their experiences with previous refugee groups, namely the Palestinians, which shaped their response to Syrian refugees after 2011. Lebanon's "standoffish" policymaking, notably their stance against building official refugee camps for Syrians, was informed by "a fear … a paranoia [within the country] … concerning what could be related to the Palestinian experience" (Mourad 2017, 260). Refugees may also benefit from others in the diaspora who migrated previously. As Achilli and Abu Samra (2019) argue, some Palestinians from Syria were able to move to Europe through informal ties and solidarity networks that paved the way.

Silo 2: Failure to Explain, or Purposeful Neglect of, the Causes of Displacement

A presentist bias can let perpetrators off the hook when the ties between displaced populations and the reasons for their forced exodus are severed. Humanitarian knowledge producers are mandated to remain apolitical, which facilitates their access to refugees and aid operations (Barnett 2013). For example, in 2019 the UNHCR published a statement about the "Iraqi refugee crisis" but avoided assigning any blame to the US government for the 2003 invasion, which led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, displaced millions, destabilized the country, and facilitated the emergence of ISIS.

The Iraqi refugee crisis is the result of decades of conflict and violence in the region. In 2014, an escalation of violence surged when the Islamic State (ISIS) launched attacks in northern Iraq. As a result of the conflict, millions of families were forced to flee their homes and half of the country's infrastructure was destroyed. (UNHCR 2019)

This assessment fails to mention state actors, including the US and Iraqi governments. Criticism of the US may have jeopardized an important relationship with the top financial supporter of UNHCR operations. The US has been the leading donor to UNHCR, giving more than one billion dollars annually since 2013. Criticism of the Iraqi government might jeopardize humanitarian access to internally displaced people. By contrast, holding ISIS rhetorically accountable does not threaten relationships with donors and states of origin. While this approach may appease host and donor states, it is in stark juxtaposition to refugees' inherent interest in the reasons for their displacement and calling out perpetrators.

When siloed approaches treat refugees as though they simply appeared on a given territory, refugees' movement is taken for granted. Applying a systems approach pushes scholars to recognize that movement must be explained, not assumed. By critically examining movement, scholars avoid a third siloed approach, the overemphasis on the Convention definition of a refugee which requires a person to flee across an international border.

Silo 3: The Use of an Exclusively Legal Definition of Refugees

The word "refugee" has legal and social implications that can be in tension. Individuals who are legally recognized as refugees, most notably those who meet the definition described in the 1951 Refugee Convention, can sometimes secure protections that are restricted to other migrants including those fleeing climate disasters, famine, or poverty. In this way, states have turned "refugee" into a privileged legal category that applies to a specified group of people. According to the Convention, a refugee is a person who

…owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Lawyers may strictly adhere to this siloed approach to make the strongest case for their clients or offer practical interventions that

operate within the parameters of the law. In the face of US President Trump's 2017 Executive Order, notoriously known as the "Muslim ban" because the first version of the law targeted migrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries, lawyers were able to secure protections for asylum seekers even while the number of resettled refugees plummeted. In 2018, 714 Syrian asylum seekers were granted protection while only 62 Syrian refugees were resettled in the US.

Scholars are not bound by this tremendous responsibility. They can define refugees more liberally, taking into consideration a wider array of lived experiences and structural conditions (Hamlin 2021). Scholars who adopt a *sociological realist* perspective emphasize that individuals and groups may be *de facto* refugees even if they are not assigned the legal label. For example, Somalis who may be categorized as labor migrants in the UAE may be received as resettled refugees in the United States (Abdi 2015). Individuals fleeing violence may enter a receiving state on tourist visas or to seek medical treatment, then seek asylum after overstaying their visas (Davis et al. 2016). Refugee self-identities are also important to consider. Some people who are legally classified as refugees may eschew the label, or use it situationally, while others may express an affinity for the title (Pearlman 2018; Jensen 2021).

Silo 4: Only Focusing on People Who Have Moved and Ignoring Those Who Stay Home

Refugee status is usually determined on an individual basis. An overemphasis on the 1951 Convention's definition of a refugee places the focus solely on people who flee across an international border, ignoring family and community members who stay behind. By doing so, siloed approaches neglect the full effects of armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Often, refugees are those who were privileged enough to leave. Exit cannot be taken for granted. Consider the two million Palestinians in Gaza who, from 2008 to 2021, experienced four wars and indiscriminate Israeli airstrikes across the tiny territory. They cannot seek refuge in neighboring states due to a land, air, and sea blockade upheld by Israel and Egypt.

Not all people who face violence decide to flee. Among those who become refugees, not everyone leaves at the same time. The overemphasis on movement neglects those who perished, remained besieged, or were otherwise left behind, creating an artificial divide between refugees and their family members. These ties shape refugees' decision-making processes. Through our book's longitudinal case study of one Syrian family, the Asfours,[2] we introduce the *new economics of displacement* to explore how refugee households make decisions together, taking into consideration how family members' gender, age, individualized threats, abilities, income, and earning potential influence who among them will migrate and where that person will go. As of 2021, half of the Asfour family was still in Syria while the other half had become refugees in Jordan and Canada.

Silo 5: A Singular Focus on the UNHCR's "Durable Solutions"

The UNHCR advances three "durable solutions": voluntary repatriation to refugees' country of origin, local integration usually in a neighboring state in the Global South, and resettlement to a third country usually in the Global North. Humanitarian objectives uph-

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2 A pseudonym.

old the priorities of states while also serving refugees. Durable solutions are state-centric solutions. They put refugees back into single nation-state containers. By breaking away from "durable solutions" frameworks, scholars can avoid what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) call "methodological nationalism" when researching post-displacement scenarios.

Scholars can apply a systems approach to interrogate the limitations of UN policy. The language of solutions suggests a universal applicability, or best practices approach, to refugee displacement. Yet, more than 20 percent of UN-recognized refugees are unable to access two of the purported solutions. An estimated 5.8 million Palestinian refugees registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in 2021 are unable to voluntarily return or resettle to a third country (UNHCR 2022). Local integration as a solution is further complicated because it overlaps with protracted displacement. Through empirical analysis, scholars can examine how a "solution" and a "problem" can be empirically indistinguishable. Refugees are simultaneously living in protracted situations, while also (potentially) integrating.

Silo 6: The Study of a Single Isolated Stage of Displacement Divorced from Other Stages

Humanitarian knowledge production often begins with a "durable solutions" framework, focusing on resettlement or reception in a particular country. Treating these as separate stages of displacement, distinct from one another, overlooks the ways in which *Southern and Northern host practices mutually constitute a global refugee system*. In addition to being the final destination for most of the world's refugees and providing territorial

space for Northern resettlement operations, Southern states are the foundation of the contemporary system of refugee management. Across the world, rights-oriented refugee reception, including adherence to the Convention and the protections outlined in national asylum policies, depend on mechanisms of immigration control that limit the number of individuals seeking refuge. The current configuration of Northern refugee reception—even in the most generous states—is only possible because Southern states contain and control most refugee movement. Given the MENA's oversized role in global refugee reception, the region is fundamental to the global system of refugee management.

A consideration of the global "architecture of repulsion," in which rich liberal democracies repel asylum seekers, reveals how *reception policies are interlinked across states* (FitzGerald 2019). The practice of containment in the MENA is the result of coordination among states in partnership with humanitarian organizations (Norman 2020; Abdelaaty 2021). These partnerships are not a one-way street. MENA states exercise their authority over the extent to which they are willing to serve as buffer states, and officials make strategic choices regarding how best to leverage their refugee hosting—and refugee containing—capacity (Arar 2017; Freier et al. 2021).

Immobility in one circuit shapes movement in others. Mechanisms of "remote control" are written into bilateral agreements (Zolberg et al. 1989). For example, Libya's proximity to Italy and Malta makes its geographic position an asset to EU officials interested in restricting the movement of those who plan to travel through Libya to seek asylum in Europe. In 2000, Italy and Libya signed an agreement that addressed coordination on issues related to terrorism, organized crime, drug smug-

gling, and irregular migration. Over the next two decades, bilateral agreements expanded the partnership to include a Libyan commitment to deport irregular migrants, a readmissions agreement in which Libya agreed to accept people deported from Italy, and the construction of immigration detention facilities funded by Italy (FitzGerald 2019). As the Libyan route became more difficult to transit, new routes opened around the Mediterranean.

Conclusion: Illuminating Connections Across Different Stages of Displacement

Refugee experiences are often studied in stages of displacement. The scope of investigation may be on violence in the home country, reception across borders to neighboring states in the Global South, or asylum seeking and resettlement in states of the Global North. Such scope limitations often do not reflect refugees' lived experiences or their priorities. Reproducing nation-state borders in defining what will be studied can also conceal how states cooperate to manage the (im)mobility of refugees and others on the move. A systems approach allows us to examine how *refugeedom*—the relationship between refugees, state, and society—interacts with *refugeehood*—the experience of becoming and being a refugee. ◆

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