TITLE
Identity Politics and Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: implications for higher education

AUTHOR
Fincham, Kathleen

JOURNAL
Comparative Education Review

DATE DEPOSITED
8 November 2022

This version available at
https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/5494/

Identity Politics and Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: implications for higher education

Introduction

In March 2011, the Syrian civil war broke out pitting government forces against various opposition forces. Since then, an estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes, and one-quarter of the Syrian population are now refugees or asylum seekers (UNHCR 2020). Lebanon is currently hosting more than 900,000 registered Syrian refugees and nearly 29,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (as well as over 475,000 Palestinian refugees) (UNHCR 2020, Government of Lebanon 2017, UNRWA 2020). Despite the country's history of civil war, conflict, political fragility and huge debt burden, Lebanon is currently hosting the world's highest per capita concentration of refugees (Migration Policy Centre 2016, UNHCR 2020). Although the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are above the age of 18, only 6% of these refugees are currently enrolled in higher education. Moreover, many refugees who enter higher education in the country struggle to complete their programmes (EU 2016b).

Identities and identity politics play a significant role in the lives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including their access to and experiences within higher education. As politicised 'non-citizen' subjects, Syrian refugees negotiate their lives in exile in relation to *guest*, *development* and *security* discourses (El-Abed 2014). While *guest* discourse acknowledges Syrians' shared ethnic, cultural and kinship ties with Lebanese, it positions refugees outside of formal legal protection in Lebanon. At the same time, *development* discourse places refugees in competition with locals for scarce resources, jobs and scholarships; while *security* discourse positions refugees as threats to national

and regional security. The politicisation of refugees through these discourses is tangible and has both social and material implications for their lives in exile.

Despite the multiple ways in which Syrian refugees are politicised in Lebanon, through humanitarianism, they are often represented as depoliticised 'suffering subjects' devoid of historical and political context (Fassin 2012, Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019). As such, refugees' different circumstances, histories, experiences and concerns are often ignored, they are represented as a homogenous group and are catered for through 'one size fits all' humanitarian policies, including access to higher education. This obscures the different ways in which refugees are positioned in relation to identity markers of citizenship, politics, ethnicity, religion and gender (among others). It also obscures the inequitable hierarchies of inclusion/exclusion within which refugees are situated and how these hierarchies impact everyday social relations in exile (Unangst and Crea 2020).

Using empirical qualitative research with focus groups as the primary research method, this paper is a critical investigation into the ways in which Syrian refugees in Lebanon are simultaneously politicised through their everyday lived experiences, yet depoliticized through humanitarian policy and practice. In particular, the paper explores how the politicization/depoliticization dichotomy impacts Syrian refugees' access to and experiences within higher education opportunities made available for them in Lebanon. The paper argues that humanitarianism's inattentiveness to intersectional identities and social hierarchies of power has often resulted in physical and psychological educational exclusions and reinforced existing inequalities and fissures/divisions between different groups of refugees.

The section below discusses the particular social, economic and political contexts in which this research takes place.

Research context

Syrian refugees in Lebanon

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol outline the rights of refugees and the obligations of States to protect these rights (UNHCR 2021a). However, as Lebanon is not a signatory to the Convention nor its Protocol, it does not designate refugee status to those who would otherwise qualify for it under international law. As such, Syrian refugees must either be registered with UNHCR or have a Lebanese sponsor in order to acquire a residence permit and legally remain in the country. It is estimated that 90% of Syrians in Lebanon are without legal residency. Without legal status, refugees are subject to arbitrary detention, arrest, exploitation and restricted movement (Buckner, Spencer and Cha 2018). If refugees are registered with UNHCR[1], they are not permitted to work in Lebanon. Despite this, many refugees work illegally in unregulated employment contexts in the informal sector (Buckner, Spencer and Cha 2018).

Syrians in Lebanon face unique challenges due to historical factors and the peculiarities of Lebanon-Syria relations. Lebanon was once considered to be part of Greater Syria until the state of Greater Lebanon (predecessor of the modern state of Lebanon) was proclaimed on 1 September 1920. Then from 1976, Syria became entangled in Lebanon's devastating civil war and went on to dominate Lebanon's political and economic life for the next 29 years, eventually becoming an occupying force in the country. Syria only withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 under international pressure. This history impacts how Syrians are perceived by the local Lebanese population (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014).

Historical factors also influence how refugees have been received in Lebanon. The presence of large numbers of Palestinians in the country, and their perceived role in national and regional instability,

---

[1] United Nations Refugee Agency

has contributed to increased Lebanese concern about the prospect of hosting more refugees (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014). This concern has resulted in the Lebanese government denying UNHCR permission to establish official refugee camps in the country (UNRWA 2020, Jazar 2015). Consequently, Syrian refugees are scattered across Lebanon, many living in informal settlements without adequate access to essential services (EU 2016a). While there are no official camps for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees from Syria living in Lebanon have sought assistance from UNRWA[2] in relation to relief, education and health care, which has strained its already scarce resources (UNRWA 2020). This competition for resources has caused friction between Palestinians from Syria and other Palestinian communities living in Lebanon.

Peculiar to the Lebanese context is the country's 'weak state', in which many non-state actors are more powerful than governmental institutions. In particular, political movements and non-state paramilitary organisations organised along religious lines maintain considerable influence in the country (the most powerful being Shi'a dominated *Hezbollah*) (Buckner, Spencer and Cha 2018). As the war in Syria has explicitly taken on religious dimensions, these actors have become implicated in the conflict. For example, *Hezbollah* fighters have been participating in combat operations in Syria to support the Syrian regime, which is dominated by the minority Alawi sect (an offshoot of Shi'a Islam). On the other hand, the majority of the Syrian population are Sunni, and most Syrian refugees in Lebanon (as well as Lebanese Sunnis) oppose the Al Assad regime. The perception amongst Lebanese (primarily Christians and Shi'a) that Sunni Syrian refugees constitute a security risk and pose a threat to the delicate communal balance established in Lebanon at the end of the Lebanese Civil War has influenced the way they are treated in educational institutions in the country, as well as in society more generally (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014). This history of political instability and sectarianism has created distinctive challenges and security issues for Syrian refugees within the Lebanese context.

---

[2] United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East

Syrian refugees and higher education

Although the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are above the age of 18, and refugees are legally entitled to enroll in higher education in Lebanon, they face many legal and socioeconomic barriers in doing so (EU 2016a). This is due to a complex range of factors, including financial hardship and depletion of family resources, dependence on scholarships and an inadequate number of scholarships available for refugees (discussed in more detail later in the paper), lack of identity documentation and proof of former study, lack of residence permits, institutional rigidity and the incapacity of local higher education institutions to absorb such large refugee numbers. To address this need, the Lebanese government has been collaborating with international donors, bilateral and multilateral agencies and INGOs to provide enough higher education opportunities to meet demand from refugees. These have included scholarships for refugees to attend local universities (both public and private), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), nonformal education, online education opportunities and international scholarships specifically established for refugees. However, Buckner et al (2018) note that the Lebanese government's capacity to implement education policy for refugees at the local level is limited. Consequently, many non-state actors are operating in unofficial settings, fully outside of and often in contradiction with government policy.

It is within this complex context of displacement, marginalization, chronic poverty and dependence on humanitarian aid that young Syrian refugees in Lebanon negotiate their identities and contemplate the prospect of continuing their education.

Theoretical framework

This paper reports on a dominant and recurring theme in the narratives of Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon – the impact of identities and identity politics on their lives in exile and their access to and

experiences in higher education. The paper builds on previous work conducted by scholars on

themes related to identity in refugee contexts, as discussed below.

Identities and exile

Social identities have a profound impact on our daily lives. How people position themselves, and

how they are positioned by others, in relation to categories of identity is significant because it brings

with it specific rights, obligations, expectations and constraints of behaviour, language and action

(Harré et al 2009). Moreover, it determines what groups people are included in and what groups

they are excluded from. Group membership not only provides people with a sense of belonging and

social inclusion, it also regulates their access to resources and opportunities and provides them with

the parameters through which they may exercise their choices and freedoms (Giddens 1991).

For exiles (e.g. Syrian refugees in Lebanon), concepts of identity and belonging are particularly

complex, as they lack the set of rights and privileges accorded to citizens (e.g. automatic access to

higher education). Moreover, refugees live their lives in the liminal, awaiting repatriation to their

homeland (Syria) or resettlement in their country of asylum (e.g. Lebanon) or a third country (e.g.

Germany). In this way, refugee identities are configured in relation to more than one nation-state

(Ahmed 1999). This has important implications for how refugees negotiate their identities and how

they navigate social relations in exile.

The politicization of refugee identities

Identities are relational and are constructed through narratives of 'difference'. 'Refugee' is an

externally imposed social category of difference which distinguishes refugees as social and national

'outsiders' in relation to the local population (e.g. Syrian refugees in Lebanon) (Moran 2019).

Through *guest*, *development* and *security* discourses (discussed in more detail later in the paper),

refugees are simultaneously constructed, represented, governed and managed as 'survivors',

6

'victims', 'freeloaders' and 'security threats' (Moran 2019, El-Abed 2014). Moreover, through

government policy, law, the media and social organisations, the social category of 'refugee' is

implemented and made manifest (Moore 2011). In this way, the lives of refugees are overtly

politicized as they navigate their everyday life experiences as outsiders in a country that is not their

own.

The governance and management of difference significantly impact refugees' social, political and

economic lives, as group identities are implicated in the allocation of resources and entitlements,

including humanitarian assistance (Moore 2011). For example, the construction of refugees as

politicised subjects has important implications for their access to and experiences within higher

education. Politicized demarcations between refugees and locals in relation to higher education can

include scholarships schemes, parallel education systems, separate classes and shifting (e.g. morning

shifts for Lebanese students and second shifts for refugees). These educational demarcations

between 'us' and 'them' are then reproduced and circulated intertextually throughout the wider

society (Riga et al 2020, Hall and du Gay 1996).

The depoliticization of refugee identities through humanitarianism

All individuals negotiate intersectional identities, and at any given time, locality, citizenship,

ethnicity, religion or gender (among many others) may serve as the focal point for identity, or for

identity politics (Alexander 2002). Moreover, identities are situated within inequitable hierarchies of

inclusion/exclusion. Thus, identities have a profound impact on social relations and refugees'

everyday experiences in exile (Unangst and Crea 2020).

However, within contexts of conflict and displacement, there is often a strong tendency toward a

discourse of monolithic and bounded identities. The most immediate and seemingly important

characteristic (e.g. being a refugee) is stressed as being central to determining young people's

experiences, values and aspirations. On the other hand, other important identifications (e.g. class, ethnicity, religion, gender) are subordinated or are rendered irrelevant (Crenshaw 1991). Within the context of humanitarianism, refugees' victimhood and trauma are emphasized as they become constructed as suffering subjects. At the same time, "the social origins of [their] suffering and distress, including poverty and discrimination, even if fleetingly recognized, are set aside" Fassin (2012: 21). In this way, refugees' lives become depoliticized as they are stripped of historical and political context (Riga et al 2020).

The depoliticization of refugee identities is reinforced through humanitarianism's universal commitment to values of neutrality, impartiality and independence within regimes of care (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019). For example, UNHCR's mandate of protection states that 'humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature' (neutrality), 'humanitarianism must be carried out on the basis of need alone' (impartiality) and 'humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold' (independence) (UNHCR 2021b). However, Forsythe (2001) argues that taking an explicitly 'non-political' stance is not the same thing as being 'value-free', and that humanitarian protection is inherently political as it entails advancing value judgments and preferences about who is to be protected and what forms of assistance are to be provided to different groups of people (Forsythe 2001). Moreover, Howlett and Ramesh (2003: 5) argue that all policy is political, as "decisions to retain the status quo are just are much policy as decisions to alter it". This renders the neutrality and impartiality asserted by humanitarian actors to be a mere fiction (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

Depoliticization of the refugee experience has implications for how humanitarian assistance is conceptualised and implemented within displacement contexts. As so-called non-politicised suffering subjects, refugees are often treated as a homogenous group with the same circumstances,

experiences and concerns. However, this obscures the different ways in which refugees are positioned in relation to different identity markers (e.g. politics, class, ethnicity, religion, gender) and how these identities impact everyday social relations in exile. For example, within the Lebanese context, while Syrian Christians and/or female refugees may well be viewed as governable subjects, Syrian Muslims and/or male refugees may be perceived as dangerous security threats to the national socio-political order and, thus, treated accordingly (Chatty 2010b, Peteet 1994). By treating all refugees the same and by ignoring their different socio-political positionings within social hierarchies of inclusion/exclusion, existing inequalities and fissures/divisions between different groups can be reinforced. Moreover, notions of 'authenticity' can result in exclusions for refugees who fall outside of the humanitarian imaginary of who a 'refugee' is (e.g. Palestinians from Syria).

Refugee agency

As discussed above, refugees are both subject *to* discourse and become subjects *within* discourse (Althusser 1972). However, they are not merely passive victims in the construction of their identities. Rather, refugees negotiate identity positions in order to gain positions of strategic advantage. At times, this may include reflexively embracing their refugee status in order to gain access to humanitarian assistance specifically provided for refugees (e.g. scholarships for higher education). At other times, refugees may distance themselves from the negative connotations associated with being displaced by strategically emphasising their shared sameness with local communities (e.g. Syrians stressing shared ethnic and/or religious identities with Lebanese) or, conversely, by asserting pride in their own group distinctiveness (Foucault 1977, Harré and Moghaddam 2003). In this way, refugees simultaneously perform and contest aspects of their identities in order to gain positions of strategic advantage (Billig 1995).

Methodology

This paper was inspired by qualitative empirical research conducted with Syrian refugee youth in and out of higher education in Lebanon as part of a wider research project funded by a large INGO and

multilateral aid agency focused on investigating Syrian youths' perspectives and experiences of higher education opportunities provided for refugees in the MENA region.

In order to privilege refugee youth perceptions of their higher education experiences in Lebanon, an interpretivist theoretical perspective was adopted for the study. Data was collected through non-participant observation and semi-structured focus groups using prepared interview schedules addressing topics such as young people's attitudes towards, their experiences in, and their expectations from higher education. These research methods were used to enable local, individual and marginalized viewpoints to emerge, as well as to recognize the existence of multiple perspectives within Syrian refugee youth populations. The main research method used was focus groups, which enabled a large amount of data to be collected within a short timeframe and provided a comfortable research environment for participants.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in January and February 2017 with the help of the INGO and multilateral aid agency and their local partners in Lebanon, who facilitated access to the refugees. Interview contexts were specifically chosen to reflect the broad range of educational experience amongst Syrian refugee youth, including youth in urban, (makeshift) camp, and rural settings, youth in public and private universities, youth in non-formal education and youth out of higher education. Within these contexts, an equal number of male and female participants were sought (where possible). Participants were also selected based on their availability and their interest to participate in the study. The age of research participants (17-30) reflects the age range most likely to be enrolled in higher education.

The interview sample is summarized in the table below:

Table 1 Interview sample

	Lebanon
Total # of focus groups	9
Total number of participants	64
Male participants	29
Female participants	35
Age range	17-30
Mean age of participants	23
Interview locations	Beirut, Taanayel, Saida, Balamand
Participant region of origin in Syria	Homs, Aleppo, Damascus, Damascus (Yarmouk camp)
Syrian youth (non-Palestinian) (all Sunni)	46
Palestinians from Syria (all Sunni)	12
Participants enrolled in public universities	2[3]
Participants enrolled in private universities	28
Participants enrolled in nonformal education	13
Participants currently out of higher education	20

In order to comply with cultural norms, single-sex focus groups lasting approximately 2 hours each were conducted with Syrian youth in the contexts described above. To enable participants to speak more freely, focus groups were limited in number and comprised approximately five youth each. Focus group interviews were conducted by the lead researcher (a UK-based white female researcher with extensive professional experience and family ties in the region) using a mixture of Arabic and English, and a native Arabic-speaking translator was always present to ensure fluency of expression

---

[3] There is only 1 public university in Lebanon – the Lebanese University.

and clarity of understanding. A reflective diary was kept by the researchers to record informal observations and responses to interview encounters. Where possible, interviews were recorded and, if needed, later translated into English. All focus group data was transcribed, and the data was systematically coded and analyzed using an 'identities' theoretical lens.

Limitations of the research included dependence on local organizations and gatekeepers to access refugee participants and complex and sometimes inefficient coordination between partner organisations. Another limitation of the study is that 100% of the research sample were Sunni Muslims. Although this is reflective of the fact that the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslim, the refugee population in Lebanon is heterogeneous, and thus, the views expressed here are not necessarily reflective of other groups of refugees.

The sections below discuss how the politicization/depoliticization of Syrian refugee identities in Lebanon has important implications for their access to and experiences within higher education.

The politicization of refugee identities in Lebanon

As discussed above, more generally, and within the context of Lebanon in particular, refugee identities are highly politicised. As politicised subjects, Syrian refugees negotiate their lives in exile in Lebanon as 'outsiders' in relation to *guest*, *development* and *security* discourses (El-Abed 2014). These discourses have tangible social and material implications for refugees, such as their access to resources and entitlements, including higher education.

Guest discourse

Within the Lebanese context, *guest* discourse draws on shared ethnic (Arab) and religious (largely Muslim) identities to assert comradery between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities, as well as to foster Lebanese responsibility for hospitality toward their Syrian brethren (El-Abed 2014).

Hospitality towards guests has always been an important part of Arabic culture, and many ordinary Lebanese share kinship ties and social networks with Syrians. Moreover, for Muslims, solidarity with their co-religionists is a value which creates a moral obligation for Lebanese Muslims (the majority) to look after Syrian Muslims (as well as other persecuted people) (Polat 2018). In addition to cultural obligations of hospitality, Lebanon has maintained special socioeconomic and political relations with Syria (e.g. the 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination) (Janmyr 2017). These bonds, combined with the Lebanese government's interest in portraying refugees as mere 'guests' to preserve internal and regional political stability, help to explain why at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Lebanese government, local municipalities and Lebanese civil society showed remarkable hospitality towards the arrival of their Syrian brethren, including generously providing them with access to educational opportunities (Buckner et al. 2018, MEHE 2016, Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019).

On the one hand, Syrians in Lebanon have benefited from the longstanding relationships between countries discussed above. For example, Syrians in the research sample noted how they sometimes strategically emphasized their shared cultural bonds and kinship networks with Lebanese in order to facilitate their integration into Lebanese society. However, *guest* discourse has also been deeply problematic for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. For example, the lexical choice of the term 'guest' refers to a 'temporary' hosting of 'the other'. As Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol, it does not recognize the state's responsibility to welcome and provide for refugees fleeing persecution. Thus, as 'guests' in Lebanon, Syrians are not entitled to the rights normally afforded to refugees. Rather, informality dominates the Lebanese legal landscape with regards to refugees, who remain dependent on ad hoc governmental decrees (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019).

Guest discourse is also bound up in relations of power. As 'hosts', the Lebanese state, as well as ordinary Lebanese, maintain positions of power over Syrian refugees. Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz (2019) note that power relations inherent in *guest* discourse establish a regime in which refugees must be willing to comply with the ethical code of the 'ideal guest' in order to be worthy of receiving asylum and other humanitarian assistance (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). This introduces an element of conditionality in relation to welfare provision and social protection, which increases refugees' vulnerabilities in the Lebanese context.

As mentioned earlier, discourse is implemented through policy and law. One way that *guest* discourse is implemented in Lebanon is through documentation requirements for guests (non-citizens) to obtain a Lebanese residence permit. As these permits are acquired through local sponsorship, Syrian refugees are dependent on the good will of Lebanese benefactors to enable them to remain in the country. As one male youth out of higher education explained,

> It is difficult to renew our residency papers in Lebanon because we need a Lebanese sponsor. Some Lebanese are kind but not all are. *('Omar', Beirut, Lebanon, February 7, 2017)*

Because of the difficulties refugees encounter in acquiring and renewing their residency permits, many Syrians noted that they were living in Lebanon illegally, which significantly added to the precariousness of their lives in exile.

Lebanese residence permits, or a lack thereof, have direct implications for refugees' access to higher education opportunities in Lebanon. Within contexts of displacement, higher education policies are often paradoxically conceptualised with reference to a 'citizen subject', which presumes certain rights and privileges, such as access to a valid passport and/or a right to remain in the country. However, as non-citizen 'others', refugees often lack these rights and freedoms. Syrian refugees in Lebanon noted that because they required a valid residence permit to take up most scholarship

14

opportunities offered to them, as well as to enrol in the only public university in the country (the Lebanese University), they were excluded from higher education opportunities in Lebanon even though they had legal access to them. While the requirement to obtain a valid residence permit was sometimes waived by 'for-profit' private universities, in the absence of a scholarship, these expensive fee-charging institutions were completely out of reach for all but the elite.

Development discourse

Development discourse asserts that the 'burden' of refugees in Lebanon has strained the national economy and infrastructure and has hampered Lebanon's achievement of its development goals (El-Abed 2014). Within this discourse, refugees and citizens are placed in competition with one another for scarce resources and jobs, fostering Lebanese anger and hostility towards refugees. On the one hand, the realities of such large numbers of refugees seeking sanctuary in Lebanon (itself a weak state) have helped to strengthen nationalist discourses (helping 'our own' first) in the country (El-Abed 2014). On the other hand, the international community has often unfairly portrayed the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people as unwelcoming hosts towards Syrians when local material conditions are unsustainable in the long run (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019).

Humanitarian assistance specifically targeted at refugees has contributed to this resentment. On the one hand, refugees in the research sample noted how they sometimes strategically emphasized their 'refugee-ness' in order to benefit from aid packages (including access to scholarships). However, they also noted that the assistance refugees received from the international community created animosity with Lebanese when local needs appeared to be ignored. As one male Syrian refugee in higher education explained,

> There is a lot of economic pressure in Lebanon. Lebanese blame us for taking away jobs. Syrian men work anywhere for any money. Lebanese students in the university are jealous of scholarships reserved for Syrians. *('Mohamed', Balamand, Lebanon, February 8, 2017)*

While refugees acknowledged that, in quantitative terms, they often received preferential treatment from international organisations in terms of access to scholarships, they also noted that the scholarships provided for refugees differed in qualitative terms. As politicised subjects, refugees were awarded scholarships which reflected donor objectives for refugee education, such as 'efficiency' – educate the maximum number of refugees at minimal cost (e.g. through online learning), and 'effectiveness' - educate refugees to achieve specific purposes (e.g. increase employability, produce a skilled workforce and drive post-conflict reconstruction) (Fincham 2020a, Fincham 2020b). Thus, in order to achieve these objectives, scholarships provided for refugees tended to focus heavily on undergraduate studies, TVET and nonformal education in priority subject areas. This resulted in many refugees studying subjects in Lebanon that were unrelated to their academic studies back in Syria and/or subjects for which they had little aptitude or interest (Fincham 2020a, Fincham 2020b). As one Syrian male in higher education in Lebanon explained,

> I studied Geology in Syria, but I couldn't find it on the list of majors for scholarship availability in Lebanon, so now I study Islamic Finance. The scholarship definitely influenced my choice of academic subject. I still dream of returning to Geology. *('Said', Taanayel, Lebanon, February 8, 2017)*

It is within this context that refugees in Lebanon generally believed that the scholarships offered to them were 'leftover' spaces at institutions after Lebanese students had been able to select their majors.

Security discourse

Refugee identities in Lebanon are also constructed through *security* discourse. Within this discourse, refugees are framed as a deviant and dangerous population that needs to be monitored, controlled and 'corrected' in order to prevent interference in the internal politics of Lebanon, contain the threat of terrorism, and prevent regional conflict from permeating Lebanon's borders (El-Abed 2014,

Moran 2019). As perceived security threats, Syrian refugees negotiate relationships and spaces in exile through everyday experiences of physical, structural and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1986). The representation of refugees as security threats is also gendered, with young Syrian men being more likely to be viewed as volatile and threatening to the moral and social order, while young women are more likely to be perceived as vulnerable. In this way, racial and gender signifiers work to frame refugees as both problems and victims (Rios-Rojas 2011, Moran 2019).

One way that *security* discourse is implemented in Lebanon is through mobility constraints for non-Lebanese. Refugees noted that their movements in the country were curtailed through military (and paramilitary) checkpoints where they were required to submit their documents for inspection. If documents could not be produced, or if they were found to be out of date, male refugees (as gendered 'existential threats' to societal security) risked arbitrary arrest and/or detention. Not only did navigating these regimes of surveillance cause refugees considerable inconvenience and discomfort, it limited their geographical mobility across the country, with many refugees hesitating to leave their local area. This had important implications for refugees' access to higher education institutions across Lebanon. As virtually all Syrian refugees in Lebanon were reliant on scholarships to continue their education, and these scholarships could only be redeemed at particular institutions which were often far away from where refugees lived, restricted mobility had profound implications for refugees' ability to access higher education opportunities which had been made available to them. As one Syrian male youth who dropped out of higher education explained,

> I dropped out of university because the checkpoints in Lebanon are too difficult. We may be arrested if our papers are out of date or be sent back to Syria. We don't feel comfortable about being sent back to Syria because we will be sent to the military or to prison. Some of us will be tortured or disappear. *('Said', Taanayel, Lebanon, February 8, 2017)*

As politicised 'others', refugees were also sometimes prevented from furthering their studies if they held the wrong type of documentation. For example, while most refugees in Lebanon held a Baccalaureate certificate issued to them by the Syrian government, a few students held the Interim Syrian Government-issued 'opposition certificate' (*al i'tilaf*). However, refugees noted that this certificate was neither recognized nor accepted for enrolment in higher education programmes in Lebanon. As one male youth out of higher education stated,

> My *i'tilaf* is not recognized in Lebanon because the government here is pro- (Syrian) regime.
>
> *('Ashraf', Taanayel, Lebanon, February 8, 2017)*

The depoliticization of refugee identities through humanitarianism

As discussed above, Syrian refugee identities are heavily politicized, and these politicized identities have profoundly influenced refugees' access to higher education in Lebanon. However, contrary to their real life experiences, humanitarianism often represents refugees as a monolithic group of depoliticised suffering subjects devoid of historical and political context (Fassin 2012). This obscures the ways in which individual refugees are differently positioned in relation to identity markers (e.g. politics, class, ethnicity, religion and gender) and how these identities impact everyday social relations in exile. It also results in 'one size fits all' policies for refugees and/or educational exclusions for refugees with complex identities who fall outside of donor imaginaries in relation to the 'authentic' refugee.

Homogenisation of refugee experience

As mentioned earlier, all individuals bear multiple identities simultaneously, and at any given time, locality, citizenship, ethnicity, religion or gender (among many others) may serve as the locus for identity, or for identity politics (Alexander 2002). In Lebanon, a particularly salient identity marker is ethnicity which is expressed with reference to religion (understood within this cultural context to

be inherited from parents at birth regardless of personal belief) (Dunne et al 2017). Religious communities in Lebanon bear distinct cultural signifiers – e.g. particular food consumption/avoidance patterns, identifiable ways of speaking and distinctive styles of dress. Moreover, within both Lebanon and Syria, religion is heavily politicised and has been deeply implicated in the civil wars in both countries. This has left deep religious/sectarian fault lines between communities (e.g. between Christians and Muslims, between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims) and resulted in distinct sectarian geographies within Lebanon (Dunne et al 2017).

It is within this context that Syrian refugees in Lebanon experience exile differently depending on their religious/sectarian affiliation. Due to the sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria and the involvement of some politicised religious communities in the war (e.g. Lebanese Shi'a *Hezbollah*), religious/sectarian fault lines between communities have become essentialised and exaggerated, often resulting in fear of the 'other'. For example, Syrian refugees in the research sample (who were all Sunni[4]) indicated that they felt anxious when entering geographical areas in Lebanon dominated by Lebanese *Shi'a*[5]. As one (Sunni) male Syrian youth out of higher education explained,

> Shi'a areas have many checkpoints and we may be kidnapped. If they find a video of a Sunni *Sheikh* (spiritual leader) on your mobile or a Syrian revolutionary flag, you will disappear.
>
> *('Musa', Beirut, Lebanon, February 7, 2017)*

However, despite the ways in which religion has been heavily politicised within Lebanon, Syria and the wider region, through humanitarianism's universal commitment to values of neutrality, impartiality and independence within regimes of care, aid organisations have remained committed to engaging with refugees as decontextualised subjects detached from local/regional politics (Carpi

---

[4] as are the vast majority of Syrian refugees
[5] Previous research with Shi'a youth in Lebanon revealed very similar perspectives in relation to their interactions with Sunni youth (… 2020).

and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019). This has resulted in the provision of 'one size fits all' aid packages for refugees in Lebanon without regard for their particular histories, experiences and sensitivities. This approach has had particular implications for Syrian refugees' access to and engagement in higher education, both restricting their psychological access to educational spaces, as well as negatively impacting their experiences within them.

One example of humanitarian imperceptiveness towards the needs of refugees pertains to scholarship provision. In Lebanon, scholarships provided for Syrian refugees can often only be redeemed at particular universities. This means that if refugees want to continue their education, they do not have the luxury of being able to choose where they study. In some cases, scholarships can only be redeemed at higher education institutions located in geographical areas dominated by the 'other'. As religion is mapped onto politics within the Lebanese/Syrian context, refugees who choose to take up these scholarships may find themselves studying alongside combatants from the opposing side in the war in Syria (e.g. pro-Syrian regime *Shi'a*-dominated Lebanese communities). For some Syrian refugees, the discomfort of taking up these scholarships has been prohibitive to the extent that they have chosen not to continue their education. As one male Syrian youth attending university in north Lebanon explained,

> We would go to a university in a Christian area but we wouldn't go to a university in a Shi'a area. There is no problem with the university. The problem is with the surrounding area. It is not safe because of the war in Syria. Christians are neutral in the war, but we will be arrested in *Hezbollah* (Shi'a) areas. My birthplace is written on my Syrian ID (within the Syrian context, town of birth often indicates religious affiliation). 90% of Syrians are Sunni, and Hezbollah is connected to the Syrian regime. They check our papers at checkpoints.
> *('Anwar', Balamand, Lebanon, February 8, 2017)*

While some refugees have chosen to take up the scholarships that were offered to them regardless of location, they noted that politicised religious/sectarian identities have often impacted their daily interactions within Lebanese higher education institutions and resulted in experiences of discrimination related to religion/sect. As one Syrian male youth in higher education explained,

> For the Lebanese Shi'a, we (Sunni Syrians) are blamed for the war in Syria and violence in Lebanon. *('Hassan', Beirut, Lebanon, February 7, 2017)*

The example above illustrates how humanitarianism's simplistic focus on access to higher education, without regard for refugees' individual histories, experiences and circumstances, has often compounded their psychological trauma and impacted their desire to continue their studies. It also illustrates how policymakers often conceptualise higher education to be a neutral space where existing fissures and divisions between communities can be papered over, rather than as a site of intense political struggle over ideas and identities. In this way, Riga et al argue (2020) that humanitarianism has often operated with 'great psychological acuity but almost total sociological blindness' in relation to the experiences and needs of refugees.

Catering for the 'authentic' refugee

In addition to the homogenisation of refugees into a monolithic depoliticised group, humanitarianism also constructs the social category of 'refugee' with reference to particular notions of 'authenticity'. Within this framing, individuals must fall within the parameters of humanitarian imaginaries in relation to who an authentic 'refugee' is in order to be eligible for asylum and to access humanitarian assistance.

Within the Lebanese context, donors and policymakers have often struggled to accommodate the needs of refugees with complex identities (e.g. Palestinians from Syria). Thus, these refugees have been left in legal, social and economic limbo with regards to their rights and entitlements, including

their access to higher education opportunities. For refugees like Palestinians from Syria, identity

politics are complex. These refugees negotiate attachments to both nation (Syria) and ethnicity

(Palestinian) in relation to eligibility for humanitarian assistance. As one female youth out of higher

education explained,

> We feel more connected to Palestine, but we are considered to be Syrian in the (Palestinian)
>
> camp. We are mistreated by Palestinians from Lebanon who consider us to be Syrians.
>
> *('Boushra', Saida, Lebanon, February 5, 2017)*

On the one hand, the complex identities described above enable Palestinian refugees from Syria to

strategically shift between identity positions in order to gain positions of advantage within different

contexts. Refugees explained how they sometimes benefited from, and capitalised upon, being from

Syria in relation to humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. For example, they noted that financial aid

specifically earmarked for Syrian refugees enabled them to accept lower salaries from Lebanese

employers than other Palestinians. However, this was not unproblematic as it often exposed these

refugees to resentment from long-term Palestinian residents in Lebanon. As one Palestinian female

refugee from Syria stated,

> The camp is already overcrowded, and they say we take their jobs. Lebanese tell
>
> Palestinians (in Lebanon), "I will get 2 Syrians to work in your place". Palestinian women in
>
> Lebanon are also jealous of us. Their husbands tell them that if they don't obey them, they
>
> will marry one of us. It is cheaper to marry a Syrian than to hire a housekeeper. *('Sahar',*
>
> *Saida, Lebanon, February 5, 2017)*

On the other hand, Palestinian refugees from Syria noted that their daily experiences of hardship in

Lebanon were shared with other Palestinians, such as the challenges of navigating camp life (there

are no official camps for Syrians in Lebanon). As one male Palestinian refugee from Syria who had

recently dropped out of higher education explained,

I had to drop out of university. In order to pass checkpoints, you need to have legal residence in Lebanon. It is very difficult for me to commute to a university in Beirut from the camp (Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp in Saida). Palestinians must always carry ID and be searched. It is different for Syrians living outside the camp. *('Mahmoud', Saida, Lebanon, February 5, 2017)*

Identity politics have important implications for Palestinian refugees from Syria in relation to their access to higher education in Lebanon. As these refugees do not conveniently fit within predetermined humanitarian notions of authentic 'Syrian-ness', they noted that they were often a donor 'blind spot' in relation to scholarship opportunities provided for Syrians. As one female Palestinian refugee from Syria out of higher education explained,

There are no special scholarships for Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon. For scholarship providers, I am not considered to be from Syria because I am Palestinian and live in a camp. *('Maisa', Saida, Lebanon, February 5, 2017)*

On the other hand, these refugees noted that they were also ineligible for some higher education opportunities provided for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as they weren't considered to be 'authentically' Palestinian. As one female Palestinian youth from Syria out of higher education explained,

I couldn't enrol in Siblin (UNRWA TVET Training Centre). It is only reserved for Palestinians from Lebanon. It is not open for Palestinians from Syria. It is as if we are not true Palestinians. *('Aisha', Saida, Lebanon, February 5, 2017)*

The discussion above illustrates how conceptualising refugees in relation to limited notions of 'authenticity' have resulted in educational exclusion, unmet needs and broken dreams. It has also worked to reinforce existing inequalities and fissures/divisions between different groups of refugees.

Conclusions

Within the context of Lebanon, refugee identities are highly politicised. As politicised 'non-citizen' subjects, Syrian refugees negotiate their lives in exile in relation to *guest*, *development* and *security* discourses (El-Abed 2014). These discourses have tangible social and material implications for refugees, simultaneously positioning them as 'guests' outside of formal legal protection, as 'benefit thieves' in competition with locals for scarce resources, jobs and scholarships and as threats to national security.

However, despite the multiple ways in which Syrian refugees are heavily politicised in Lebanon, under the auspices of humanitarian values of neutrality, impartiality and independence, refugees are often represented as decontextualised suffering subjects detached from local/regional politics (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019). As such, individual refugee's unique histories, experiences, circumstances and concerns are ignored, they are treated as a homogenous group and are catered for through 'one size fits all' policies. This obscures the distinctive ways in which refugees are positioned in relation to different identity markers (e.g. politics, class, ethnicity, religion and gender) and how these identities impact everyday social relations in exile.

Identities have important implications for Syrian refugees' access to and experiences within higher education. As politicised 'outsiders' in Lebanon, refugees encounter educational barriers related to documentation, limited livelihood and scholarship opportunities and restrictions on movement for 'non-citizens'. These factors impede Syrian refugees from engaging in higher education in Lebanon, even though they may have legal access to it. On the other hand, the depoliticization of refugee

identities through humanitarianism, and its inattentiveness to intersectional identities and social hierarchies of power, have restricted refugees' physical and psychological access to learning spaces, as well as negatively influencing their experiences within them. Moreover, existing inequalities and fissures/divisions between different groups of refugees have been reinforced. In these ways, higher education has often fallen short of its potential to enable refugees to live their best lives.

References

Ahmed, S. (1999). 'Home and Away: Narratives of migration and estrangement'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(3), pp. 329-347.

Alexander, C. (2002). 'Beyond black: Rethinking the colour/culture divide'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(4), pp. 552–571.

Althusser, L. (1972). 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses'. In Lenin and philosophy and other essays. New York and London: Monthly Review Press.

Billig, M. (1995). Banal Nationalism. London, Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). 'The forms of capital'. In Richardson, J., Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. Westport, CT: Greenwood: 241–58.

Buckner, E., Spencer, D., & Cha, J. (2018). 'Between policy and practice: The education of Syrian refugees in Lebanon'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(4), pp. 444-465.

Carpi, E. and Pınar Şenoğuz, H. (2019) 'Refugee Hospitality in Lebanon and Turkey. On Making "The Other"', *International Migration*, 57(2), pp. 126–142. doi: 10.1111/imig.12471.

Chatty, D. (2010). 'Palestinian refugee youth: Agency and aspiration'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28(2–3), pp. 318–338.

CIA (2021). The World Factbook: Lebanon. Available at: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon/. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.' *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6), pp. 1241–99. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039

Dunne, M., Durrani, N., Fincham, K., and Crossouard, B. (2017). Troubling Muslim Youth Identities. Nation, Religion, Gender. London: Palgrave.

El-Abed O. (2014). The discourse of Guesthood: Forced Migrants in Jordan. In Fabos, A. and Osotalo, R. (eds) Managing Muslim Mobilities, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

European Union (EU). (2016a). Lebanon: Syria Crisis Echo Factsheet. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/lebanon_syrian_crisis_en.pdf. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

European Union (EU) (2016b). EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/syria/madad/20160526-ad-1st-board-he-ares.pdf. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

Fassin, D. (2012). Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E., Loescher, G., Long, K. and Sigona, N. (eds). (2014). The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fincham, K. (2020a). 'Rethinking higher education for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey'. *Research in Comparative and International Education*. DOI: 10.1177/1745499920926050

Fincham, K. (2020b). 'Higher education and Syrian refugees' navigation of economic, social and political constraints in exile'. *Education and Conflict Review* (3), pp.29-37.

Forsythe, D. (2001). UNHCR's mandate: the politics of being non-political. Working Paper No. 33, New Issues in Refugee Research. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/3ae6a0d08.pdf. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and Punish. London, Tavistock.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-identity. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Government of Lebanon. Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020. Available at http://www.LCRP.gov.lb and http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

Hall, S. and du Gay, P. (eds). (1996). Questions of cultural identity. London: Sage.

Harré, R., and Moghaddam, F. (2003). 'Introduction: The self and others in traditional psychology and in positioning theory'. In R. Harré and F. Moghaddam (eds.), The self and others (pp. 1–11). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Howlett, M. and Ramesh, M. (2003). Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Janmyr, M. (2017). 'No Country of Asylum: "Legitimizing" Lebanon's Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention', International Journal of Refugee Law, Volume 29, Issue 3, October 2017, pp. 438–465, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eex026

Jazar, M. (2015). Safeguarding and Developing Higher Education in Syria and Lebanon. Lebanese Association for Scientific Research. Available at http://laser-lb.org/about-us/lasers-reports/safeguarding-and-developing-higher-education-syria-lebanon. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

MEHE (2016). Reaching all children with education in Lebanon: RACE II (2017-2021). August 2016. Ministry of Education and higher education, Lebanon. Available at : http://race.mehe.gov.lb/wp-content/uploads/RACE-II_FINAL-Narrative_29AUG2016.pdf. Accessed 23/04/2019.

Migration Policy Centre (2016). Syrian Refugees: A snapshot of the crisis in the Middle East and Europe. European University Institute, Florence. Available at http://syrianrefugees.eu/. Accessed 23/04/2019.

Moore, H. (2011). Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Moran, L. (2019). Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural world: refugee youth and the pursuit of identity. Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies. Newark: Rutgers.

Peteet, J. (1994). 'Male gender and rituals of resistance in the Palestinian "Intifada": A cultural politics of violence'. American Ethnologist, 21(1), 31–49.

Polat, R. K. (2018). 'Religious solidarity, historical mission and moral superiority: Construction of external and internal "others"'. In AKP's discourses on Syrian refugees in Turkey. Critical Discourse Studies, 15(5), pp. 500-516.

Riga, L., Langer, J. & Dakessian, A. (2020). 'Theorizing refugeedom: becoming young political subjects in Beirut'. Theory and Society, 49, pp. 709–744. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09393-2

Rios-Rojas, A. (2011). 'Beyond Delinquent Citizenships: Immigrant Youth's (Re)Visions of Citizenship and Belonging in a Globalized World'. Harvard Educational Review 81(1), pp. 64–94.

Unangst, L., & Crea, T. M. (2020). Higher Education for Refugees: A Need for Intersectional Research. *Comparative Education Review*, 64(2), 000-000.

UNHCR (2020). Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. Available at https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

UNHCR (2021a). The 1951 Refugee Convention. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee
convention.html#:~:text=The%201951%20Refugee%20Convention%20and,the%20basis%20of%20our%20work.&text=The%20core%20principle%20is%20non,to%20their%20life%20or%20freedom. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

UNHCR (2021b). Emergency handbook: Humanitarian principles. Available at: https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/44765/humanitarian-principles#:~:text=The%20neutrality%20of%20humanitarian%20action,humanitarian%20actors%20to%20be%20autonomous. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

UNRWA (2020) Where we work – Lebanon. Available at https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon. Accessed on 24/05/2021.

Watenpaugh, K.D., Fricke, A. and King, J.R. (2014). The War Follows Them: Syrian university students and scholars in Lebanon. International Institute of Education. UC Davis. Available at http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Publications-and-Reports/IIE-Bookstore/The-War-Follows-Them-Syrian-University-Students-And-Scholars-In-Lebanon#.WKR7HfmLQ2w. Accessed 23/04/2019.