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AMBIVALENCE AS POLICY: CONSEQUENCES FOR REFUGEES IN EGYPT

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that when considering migration to developing countries, the scholarship on migration and refugee policy mistakes the absence of formal policy for neglect. Using a qualitative case study approach, I examine the case of Egypt, the most populous country in the region and the host of a sizeable urban refugee population. As the evidence offered in this paper will illustrate, the Egyptian government is fully aware of the number of refugees residing in its territory, but chooses to pursue a policy of ambivalence toward them. I address ambivalence from the viewpoint of refugees, and ask how refugees cope in a host country that adopts this type of policy. Using original data collected in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt in 2014, I illustrate how both formal and informal rules constrain certain behaviours towards refugees living under this type of regime and permit others. The findings of this paper have important implications for the literature on migration and refugees, and provide a starting point from which to consider how refugees in other developing host states manage under a policy of ambivalence.

INTRODUCTION

Many refugees travel to countries such as Egypt with the intention of passing through on their way to Europe or other Western states. In reality though, only a small fraction manage to do so successfully; the majority find themselves remaining, perhaps indefinitely, in transit states that are rapidly becoming countries of migrants and refugee settlement. As this paper will explain, the Egyptian government is fully aware of the refugee groups residing in its territory and has unofficially permitted their continued presence due to

both its inability to successfully prevent them from entering the country and the fact that the vast majority of these groups have not been deported. Why does Egypt permit refugees to remain indefinitely, and what determines whether the government treats these groups inclusively or exclusively, or with what I will term ‘ambivalence’?

In this context, ambivalence refers to inaction on the part of the host state, and can be analytically distinguished from both a liberal and an exclusionary strategy by its intent: the aim of an ambivalent strategy is neither to drive out nor to fully include refugees in society, but rather to maintain the status quo. I argue that ambivalence is different from mere neglect in that the state is aware of the presence of refugee groups, but chooses not to engage with them, and turns a blind eye, relying instead on international organizations and NGOs to carry out engagements on its behalf.

By utilizing this type of policy, and due to certain of its characteristics, Egypt has been able to ignore the social and political implications of its new inward migration flows: refugees have found ways to integrate into the large informal economy, international and domestic organizations have intervened to provide essential services, and the issue of migration has not been so highly politicized that it has had prolonged traction in the media or in the native population. The benefits of a policy of ambivalence for Egypt are numerous: they include economic gains through refugees’ participation in the informal economy, remittances that are spent locally, aid from international organizations, and international credibility for refraining from deporting refugees (Norman 2016).

In this paper, I address ambivalence from the viewpoint of the refugees themselves, and ask how they cope in a state that shows ambivalence towards them and what kinds of behaviour are permitted or restricted. Using original data¹ collected in two cities in Egypt — Cairo and Alexandria — I examine the consequences of this type of host state policy for refugees. Because the distinction between refugees and migrants is not always especially clear, as acknowledged by the literature on “mixed migration,”² I should clarify from the outset that I am discussing refugees in a very general sense: my study includes individuals with official refugee designations, asylum-seekers who have requested status and are awaiting an interview, and migrants whose

1. See Appendix A for information on the data collection process.

2. Since the 1990s, some migration scholars and international migration bodies have begun advocating for the term “mixed migration.” This is because the root causes of migration such as conflict and poverty are interrelated, and because it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between forced and economic migrants in certain movements (Castles and Van Hear 2011).

refugee applications have been rejected (i.e. “closed files”) or who have never applied for refugee status but consider themselves to be unable to return to their home country.

MISCONCEPTIONS OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN DEVELOPING HOST STATES

Most of the academic literature on migration and citizenship examines the phenomenon of movement from the Global South to the Global North. Prior to 2000, countries of the Global North hosted a larger percentage of international migrants than did those of the Global South (UN Population Division 2013), but since that time, the migrant population in the South has been growing more rapidly than it has in the North. Between 2000 and 2010, the average annual growth rate for migrants in the South was 2.5 per cent per year, compared to 2.3 per cent in the Global North, and since 2010 the annual growth rate has remained 0.3 per cent higher in the Global South (ibid). Furthermore, in 2013, nearly nine out of every ten refugees in the world was living in a developing country, and some 13.7 million refugees – or 87.2 per cent of the 15.7 million refugees worldwide – were in countries in the global South (ibid).

Despite these figures, there has been comparatively little theorization³ on how developing host countries choose to treat refugees: whether to offer access to residency, employment, and services on a par with their citizens or whether to treat them with exclusion. What accounts for the comparative lack of analysis of developing countries as host states? There are three assumptions that are embedded in the extant literature on migration to developing countries that prevent us from understanding this phenomenon adequately.

First, much of the existing literature assumes the impermanent status of refugees residing in developing host states. They are thought to be merely in transit and to be destined for Western democracies — Europe, North America, or Australia – and so they view any country they cross while en route to these Western states as a place of temporary residence. While this viewpoint is not entirely incorrect, it does provide an incomplete picture, which lacks many of the nuances that underpin the realities of contemporary migration to and through developing countries.

3. This is not to discount important works by, for example, Harrell-Bond (1986), Zolberg et al. (1992) or Alexander Betts (2013), in addition to numerous individual country studies. My argument is that in comparison to the multitude of academic literature on immigration to countries in the Global North, there is a much smaller focus on the Global South.

For example, in South-Eastern Mediterranean countries such as Egypt, only a minority of the labour migrants, refugees, and transit migrants who reside there are heading for Europe. According to a study conducted by Fargues in 2009, of the at least 3.6 million illegal migrants in the region at that time, between two and three million were workers attracted by local labour markets, and only some 100,000 were transit migrants who intended to continue on to Europe (ibid). Migrants and refugees are strategic actors who will adapt their routes based on the most recent information available (de Haas 2007), and perhaps realizing the near impossibility of crossing into "Fortress Europe," they have altered their plans. If the possibility of reaching Europe or elsewhere is too dangerous or costly, they will consider other possibilities.

Another assumption in the literature that further underpins the sense of impermanence is the idea that forced migratory flows will eventually reverse themselves once refugees are able to return home. Karen Jacobsen (1996) looks at the question of why refugee-receiving states sometimes respond generously to short-term refugee flows, finding that political calculations of the local community's absorption capacity and the costs or benefits of international funding are important considerations (Jacobsen 1996). This work assumes that refugee flows will be temporary, however, even though it is not always the case that refugees are able to repatriate: the conflicts that produce refugees in Africa and the Middle East are becoming increasingly protracted, and refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Afghanistan in the second half of the twentieth century found themselves faced with circumstances in which the conflict that had forced them to flee failed to end with a secure situation in their home state.

The assumption that refugees will return home once a conflict has ended is the result of an active decision taken on the part of the international community in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It used to be the case that forced migration situations were viewed as having three durable solutions: repatriation, integration into the host state, and resettlement (Jacobsen 2001), and yet since the 1980s developing host states have begun to view repatriation as the only viable solution for refugee situations, even where the situation in a refugee's home country remains less than ideal. Barnett (2001) examines how the UNHCR has managed to reconcile states' preference for repatriation with its long-standing protection and assistance mission to protect against *refoulement* (Barnett 2001). Previously, voluntary repatriation

...demanded that the refugee consent to return to a country that in his or her view no longer represented a threat to his or her safety. But UNHCR officials began introducing new concepts like "voluntariness" that meant that refugee consent was no longer necessary and that the home situation need only have appreciably improved or held out the promise of improving. (261).

In line with this new mentality, which favours the UNHCR's knowledge claims over those offered by refugees, the UNHCR is no longer required to obtain informed consent before authorizing repatriation, even where the uncertain security situation in a home country may be well known to the refugee in question (ibid).

The majority of refugees no longer live in camps, which is the second assumption underpinning the literature on migration in a developing country context. Egypt in particular has never adopted a policy of setting up camps, with the exception of the Saloum Camp on the border with Libya, which was established in 2011 for a temporary period. In actuality, more than half of the world's refugees live in urban areas (Ward 2014). In the Middle East specifically, the vast majority of refugees reside outside camps in urban or rural areas (ibid). In Jordan, a country with some of the largest refugee camps in the world, approximately 80% of refugees live in urban areas. In Turkey, which currently hosts 2.2 million refugees, only 25% live in camps. While refugees who are housed in camps run by the UNHCR against their will may have little contact with a host population or government, refugee and migrant populations who live in urban areas have a great deal of interaction with host country nationals, and may also have interactions with host state governments.

The final misconception embedded in the literature on migration to developing countries is that because of reduced state capacities, developing countries are not capable of engaging with or providing services to refugees. As Betts (2010) states, *"With relatively porous borders, limited capacity to deport, and a clearly defined legal obligation not to forcibly return refugees to their countries of origin if they face persecution, these neighbouring states have little choice but to host refugees"* (Betts 2010; 13). In other words, developing or emerging host states do not have the capacity to prevent migration, and thus must accept their role as temporary host countries. In a similar vein, Hollifield (2004) writes: *"In Africa and the Middle East, which have high numbers of migrants and refugees, there is a great deal of instability, and states are fluid with little institutional or legal capacity for dealing with international migration"* (905). Contrary to these concepts, I argue that state capacity does not in and of itself determine host states' responses to refugees; rather, states make strategic calculations of when and how to engage refugee populations based on the incentives involved. Kagan (2012) comes to a similar conclusion when looking at host states in the Middle East and North Africa. He writes:

With the possible exceptions of Lebanon, Yemen and post-Baathist Iraq, where central governments are weak, one risks making an incorrect generalization to think that Arab governments are unable to administer refugee policy on their own. It would be more accurate to say that they are unwilling, and there are specific reasons why. (Kagan 2012; 320).

Furthering Kagan’s argument, this paper develops a new concept for understanding host state engagement in developing countries — ambivalence — and explores its consequences for refugees, using Egypt as an illustration. If we can classify Egypt’s dominant policy toward refugees as one of ambivalence, meaning that the state relies primarily on international institutions to carry out undertakings and turns a blind eye to local integration practices (Norman 2016), what impact does this have on refugees, and what activities and behaviours are permitted in the host state? As this paper will show, ambivalence gives refugees the ability to participate economically and socially on an informal basis, but the absence of formal state protection can also mean that they are subject to xenophobia, inconsistent access to basic services, and, potentially, trouble with the host state authorities.

MIGRATION INTO EGYPT

Refugee groups from the Horn of Africa – and Sudanese refugees in particular – have been predominant in Egypt since the 1990s. Continuing conflicts in the region and the so-called “Arab Spring” have, however, also led to a sudden, intermittent rise in the number of refugees from Iraq, followed by Libya, and most recently Syria. The most recent UNHCR figures are presented in the table below.

Nationality	Total
Sudan	28,899
Ethiopia	9,767
Iraq	6,819
Somalia	6,920
South Sudan	4,655
Eritrea	5,419
Syria	117,168
Others	2,506
Total	184,966

The actual number of refugees residing in Egypt is uncertain, and the numbers who register officially with the UNHCR are acknowledged to be only a fraction of the actual total. For example, while the UNHCR registered

139,000 Syrians at the height of the influx, at the time of my interviews in 2014 the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated that 100,000 Syrians remained unregistered, even though they were residing in the country.⁴

The vast majority of refugees live in Cairo, although other coastal cities such as Alexandria and Damietta have become popular locations for refugees hoping to be smuggled to Europe, or possibly because they are less expensive than Cairo, and some refugees have existing social networks there (UNHCR et al. 2013).⁵ One important element that makes Cairo an attractive destination for refugees is the existence of an extensive resettlement program in the shape of both the UNHCR presence and private sponsorship programs to Canada, Australia, and the United States (Grabska 2006). This system constitutes a strong pull factor for those hoping to be resettled, although the numbers of resettled refugees are relatively small (Kagan 2011). Owing to this pattern of high inflows and low outflows, Cairo hosts a sizeable urban refugee population.

Its economy is also an attraction for both migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa. As the director of one of the fifty-seven refugee schools located in Cairo explained, *"They come to Egypt because it's a big city, a big economy. Maybe eventually they'd like to go elsewhere, but in comparison to African countries, Egypt looks pretty good."*⁶ As mentioned earlier, the distinction between a refugee and a migrant is not always very clear. In the Egyptian case in particular, individuals arriving and applying for refugee status from the UNHCR are given a "yellow card", which means that they are asylum-seekers and under temporary protection until they undergo refugee status determination (RSD). At the time interviews for this research were being carried out in the autumn of 2014, RSD interview dates were being given to asylum-seekers for 2019, meaning that would-be refugees would need to wait five years before receiving an official status. As such, it is to any migrant's benefit to apply for refugee status and receive temporary protection benefits for up to five years even if they suspect they will not qualify as a refugee.⁷ Nonetheless, refugees and migrants fall under two distinct international legal regimes, and Egypt has obligations towards refugees whether they have been accessed and reside in its territory legally or are there illegally.

The subsequent sections examine four parameters of refugee life in Egypt under a policy of ambivalence, where both formal and informal rules constrain certain behaviours and permit others.

4. Interview at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cairo, 11 November 2014.

5. Looking at Syrian refugees specifically, in 2016, 62% of Syrians were residing in the Greater Cairo area, 20% in Alexandria, and 8% in Damietta (De Bel Air 2016)

6. Interview with Jonathan Turland, Cairo, 14 September 2014.

7. Interview with Michael Houghton, Cairo, 18 September 2014.

EMPLOYMENT & ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

With regard to the formal employment of refugees, Egypt signed the 1951 Convention with some careful restrictions (Zohry and Harrell-Bond 2003).⁸ While refugees technically have the same right to employment as other foreigners there, they must prove that an Egyptian is not more qualified for the same job (Kagan 2011). However, in a country such as Egypt, which has a large informal economy (ILO, 2012), refugees have been able to secure employment without authorization in the illegal job market. As a UNHCR representative told me,

I'm not calling them refugees, because they are not registered with the UNHCR, but for many reasons they are in the country. They are migrants. So, Egypt is welcoming for this migrant population. They are integrated somehow. They are not integrated to the extent of taking nationality, but they can find their livelihoods, they can reside in the country...For sure the labour provided by migrants and refugees is serving a lot of Egyptians. To give an example, all domestic workers – cleaning ladies, drivers, nannies, housekeepers – most of them are migrants. Maybe not drivers, but most of them are migrants from African nationalities. And most of the high class and middle class Egyptians, they can not survive without them.⁹

According to individuals interviewed at the UNHCR and IOM, refugees have found jobs in the garment, food, craft, and industrial sectors, while others do domestic work in wealthy Egyptian households as cleaners, nannies, and drivers. But as a result of only being able to access work in the informal economy, many individuals are subject to exploitation or dangerous working conditions.¹⁰ For example,

8. Specifically, Egypt claimed reservations to Article 12.1, thereby waiving the responsibility for determining the personal status of refugees, as well as Articles 20, 23 and 24, which claim that refugees should be afforded equal status to nationals as regards rationing, public relief, and assistance and labor laws and social security (Zohry and Harrell-Bond 2003).

9. Interview with Ziad Ayoubi, Cairo, 17 September 2014. The extent to which upper and middle class Egyptians rely on migrant and refugee domestic workers should be interpreted as this individual's perception rather than an objective fact.

10. The majority of Egyptians residing in urban areas are also employed in the informal economy, where they, too, experience exploitation to varying degrees, depending on their occupation, sector of activity, and gender.

For one month I worked at a factory in Cairo. The Egyptians in the same job would make 150 EGP a day, but the Sudanese, for example, would make 70 or 50 for the same job. And working from 8 in the morning until 8 at night. Twelve hours. So for the month I'd make 1,200 EGP, but apartments are expensive, and gas is expensive, and the salary isn't enough.¹¹

In my country I also worked in a juice shop, but nicer than this one. There were seven people working there, and the hours were good. Here I work 11 or 12 hours a day, unless the electricity goes like it yesterday. Then I get an hour or two off maybe.¹²

Egyptian landlords also take advantage of the presence of refugees by charging them inflated rents. As the director of a refugee school noted, *"For landowners it's a great opportunity to make more money because a lot of the Egyptians are under the old Nassar system where they're paying fifteen pounds a month [in rent]."*¹³ A Sudanese refugee informed me that Egyptian *simsars* (housing brokers) will size up migrants or refugees based on nationality and show them neighbourhoods accordingly. Alluding to this informal system, this Sudanese refugee stated, *"They know each type of customer, they know how much they have in their pocket."*¹⁴ A representative from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) confirmed this, recalling: *"I remember it starting with the Sudanese when I was living here in 2003 or 2004. There's lots of demand anyway, and there's a shortage of housing. So with increasing numbers of Sudanese refugees the rent kept increasing."*¹⁵

While the Egyptian government may not sanction the participation of refugees in the country's workforce at an official level, it is nonetheless permitting their participation by turning a blind eye. As such, certain sectors of the Egyptian economy benefit from the labour and rent contributions of refugees, even while these individuals face exploitation.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION & ADVOCACY

Many refugees in Cairo have formed community-based organizations (CBOs) that often provide a physical location for gatherings as well as services like language-training, aid for those experiencing difficulties in obtaining service provision or seeking informal work, and community activities. Yet despite

11. Interview with Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 9 October 2014.

12. Interview with Syrian refugee, Cairo, 9 November 2014.

13. Interview with Jonathan Turland, Cairo, 14 September 2014.

14. Interview with Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 21 September 2014.

15. Interview with Dr. Amira Mohamed, Cairo, 10 November 2014.

the presence of numerous CBOs, these organizations are fragmented, and focus primarily on supporting the individual members of their national communities (Sudanese, South Sudanese, Eritrean, Central African Republic, etc.). Even for highly organized refugee communities like the Sudanese, attempts at advocacy have been largely unsuccessful, and in some cases even violent.

In the most extreme case, twenty-six Sudanese refugees were killed by the Egyptian security forces after refusing to disband their protest outside the UNHCR offices in the upper-class Cairo neighbourhood of Mohandiseen in 2005 (Salih 2006). The protest was organized to object to the UNHCR's decision to suspend refugee status determination procedures for Sudanese in Egypt (Judell and Brücker 2015). Following this incident, the Egyptian government requested that the UNHCR move its offices to a remote satellite city on the outskirts of Cairo in order to avoid future confrontation and violence. Fatima Idris, the director of an Egyptian-based NGO that works on migrant and refugee issues, recalls,

I was there [*at the protest*]. Lots of people died, and lots of people went missing as well. It was so sad, I was so angry with UNHCR. But no, *khalas*. And since then we haven't seen any protests like this, because that was the setting up of refugees. It was naïve as well, because demonstrations can't get them anything, but they take a lot.¹⁶

The superintendent of a school for refugees confirmed this sentiment, saying, "*I think most of the refugees have taken the attitude of 'we want to stay low. We don't want to raise attention to ourselves.'*"¹⁷

A staff member from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a human rights organization based in Cairo that has a subsection focusing on migrant and refugee rights issues in Alexandria, told me that he advises his clients against protesting.

We don't advise them to. Some Syrians think about some kind of protests, but we advise them not to [*protest*]...Some of them were thinking to protest against UNHCR, but we advised them not to do, because then they may get arrested.¹⁸

When I asked refugees about protesting or engaging in political activities, only three of the thirty-three subjects interviewed said that they participate in host state political activities. For these three individuals, political activities never involved protests or demonstrations, but included activities like writing

16. Interview with Fatima Idris, Cairo, 22 September 2014.

17. Interview with Jonathan Turland, Cairo, 14 September 2014.

18. Interview with Ahmed El-Chazli, Alexandria, 1 November, 2014.

articles or speaking to journalists. While many refugees mentioned being involved in political activities in their home countries, they were unable or reluctant to participate while in Egypt. For some there are simply no opportunities to engage in political activities, while others are fearful of the Egyptian police and *mukhabarat* (the state intelligence service). The responses I received to the question of political participation included:

It's hard. Within 24 hours, they'll take you. Here, sometimes the UNHCR will not take people from the prison, because the UNHCR has no right to enter the prison. So if you enter the prison, forget it.¹⁹

No, because you can't. I used to do a lot of advocacy back in Sudan, but I can't here. The Egyptian government won't let us.²⁰

In Sudan I was a member of the Sudan People Liberation Movement. But now that I'm here, I'm an artist. No more politics, only in Sudan.²¹

Owing both to the securitized atmosphere of post-revolutionary Egypt, where even Egyptians are barred from organized protest,²² and to the precarious legal status of refugees, opportunities for overt protest in the Egyptian host state are limited, although though more subtle forms of advocacy, such as community gatherings, cultural activities, articles, or speaking to journalists, are deemed innocuous enough to be permissible.

CULTURAL ADAPTATION

The perception of shared culture is cited in the migration literature as a strong indicator of successful socioeconomic outcomes for immigrants in Western host states like Europe, North America and Australia (Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Adida et al 2010; Danzinger and Laitin 2014). Does the perception of shared culture also affect relations between a host state society and refugees in a developing state like Egypt? In other words, are refugees from certain nationalities treated more favourably than others? This question first needs to be separated into its *de jure* and *de facto* aspects: for example,

19. Interview with Eritrean refugee, Cairo, 26 October 2014.

20. Interview with Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 28 September 2014.

21. Interview with Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 24 September 2014.

22. A protest law came into effect in November 2013 requiring three days' notice before protesting. The Egyptian Ministry of the Interior also has the right to cancel, postpone, or move any protest.

Sudanese and Syrian children are permitted to attend primary school free, yet even with this *de jure* access, individuals may still face barriers due to racism or discrimination. As one Sudanese refugee explained,

Sudanese and Syrians can attend primary school free. I think it's easier for the Syrians though, because they don't face as much discrimination. And they speak the same language. If a Sudanese student goes to school on the first day, maybe she doesn't understand the teacher at all. So a lot of Sudanese try and send their kids to private school instead.²³

As regards the shared language, Arabic-speaking refugees are likely to have an easier time seeking services compared to non-Arabic speakers. One Eritrean refugee noted that

Eritrea has a different language, different culture, so they have a harder time integrating. It's like, Sudanese, they're Arab. Like Egypt, like Syria. But Eritrea has its own culture. So life here is hard for Eritreans.²⁴

This raises the issue of whether perceptions of shared culture actually lead to increased acceptance among the Egyptian host population. The idea of a shared culture between refugees and the Egyptian population is not easily demarcated, however: some South Sudanese and Sudanese refugees expressed a sense of "African solidarity" in that they believe the Egyptian government favours Syrians or other "Arab" refugees over those from Africa:

Yes, there's more services for Syrians, Libyans, Iraqis, keda. All the Arab groups. They don't have to pay for university, for example.²⁵

And yet three out of the six Eritreans interviewed explained that the Sudanese are considered by the Egyptian government to be "Arabs," as opposed to Africans.

Yes, there's some discrimination. For example, if you're Eritrean and you don't have your residency visa they'll throw you in jail. But it's not like that for Sudanese or Syrians.²⁶

23. Interview with Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 25 September 2014.

24. Interview with Eritrean refugee, Cairo, 26 October 2014.

25. Interview with South Sudanese refugee, Cairo, 27 October 2014.

26. Interview with Eritrean refugee, Cairo, 22 September 2014.

From the perspective of the Eritreans, this “Arab-ness” comes with certain privileges. Sudanese refugees may therefore be simultaneously African and Arab, depending on the point of view.

The responses from Syrians with regard to preferential treatment were mixed. Some believed their national group to be the worst off in terms of treatment:

The treatment here made us want to leave. Maybe from the sea, to another country. The treatment is very, very bad. Unlike the Sudanese, or the Libyans, and Somalis. No, the treatment is very bad for the Syrians.²⁷

Others, on the other hand, indicated that Syrians are treated more favourably, even in the light of the events following the removal of former President Mohammed Morsi from political office (as will be discussed further in the next section).

I think Africans have it worse than Syrians. Maybe it's because they always come here illegally. And right after Morsi was forced out, things were bad for Syrians, mostly from the Egyptian people. They didn't trust us, they thought we were all affiliated with the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood]. But in general, Egyptians trust the Syrians more. We're their Syrian brothers, you know? For Africans it's more difficult.²⁸

The influence of host state identity on the treatment of refugees and its links to perceived cultural affiliation is multi-faceted, and operates depending on the context. The next section demonstrates, however, that any favouring of co-cultural refugees on the part of the Egyptian government is overridden by the state's security interests.

DOMESTIC SECURITY

The case of Syrians in Egypt demonstrates that cultural affinity with the host population does not always benefit refugees, particularly during times of domestic instability or periods of tension between the refugee sending state and the host state. A preference for culturally similar refugees appears to underlie decisions taken by the government of former President Mohamed Morsi with regard to Syrians. When Syrian refugees began arriving *en masse* in 2012, Morsi announced that all Syrian children residing in Egypt would be granted enrolment in public schools regardless of their official UNHCR status,

27. Interview with Syrian refugee, Alexandria, 3 November 2014.

28. Interview with Syrian refugee, Cairo, 27 September 2014.

and that Syrian families would have access to Egyptian public hospitals free of charge.²⁹ If Egypt's *modus operandi* toward other migrant groups is one of ambivalence, this recognition and willingness to offer services to Syrians represented an anomalous break. Furthermore, if a lack of capacity had been preventing Egypt from extending state services to other groups previously, then one would expect this to have been an even more difficult challenge with the large Syrian population.

It became clear in hindsight, however, that this decision was not motivated by any cultural affinity with Egypt's "Syrian brothers", but was politically motivated by Morsi's desire to show solidarity with the Syrian opposition forces, and yet as a result of this affiliation, following the Egyptian military coup in July 2013 that ousted Morsi, Syrians in Egypt became the subject of a government-organized media campaign that referred to the group as "terrorists" allied with the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi's supporters.³⁰ While the special treatment – healthcare and access to primary education – that had been extended to Syrian refugees under President Morsi was theoretically continued by the subsequent military government, the *de facto* treatment of Syrians changed dramatically.

As a result of the increasingly hostile treatment of Syrians in Egypt, Amnesty International documented a sharp increase in the number of Syrian refugees attempting to escape to Europe (Amnesty International 2013). From January to August 2013, an estimated six thousand Syrian refugees managed to reach Italy by boat from Egypt, a figure that spiked to over three thousand during the period from September to mid-October. Further, Human Rights Watch documented over 1,500 cases of prolonged detainment of Syrian refugees between July and December 2013, as well as hundreds of cases of coerced refoulement to Syria (Human Rights Watch 2013).

By 2014, the situation had become less dire for Syrians, though other national groups also had problems. In June 2013, disagreements arose between Ethiopia and Egypt over the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia (Witte 2013). Both countries consider the Nile River to be a vital water and electricity resource (ibid). As a result of Egyptian news reports condemning Ethiopians and predicting nationwide water shortages in Egypt, Ethiopian refugees were evicted by Egyptian landlords and harassed by Egyptians in the street.³¹ While the construction of the Renaissance Dam is a foreign policy issue, and arguably fairly far removed from everyday interactions between Egyptians and refugees, the Egyptian media helped to make the issue highly personal.

29. Interview with Shady Ramadan, Cairo, 22 October 2014.

30. Interview with Ziad Ayoubi, Cairo, 17 September 2014.

31. Interview with Amr Taha, Cairo, 7 October 2014.

In the second half of 2015, several incidents were also directed towards the Sudanese refugee community in Cairo (Center for Refugee Solidarity 2016). In the period preceding parliamentary elections in Egypt at the end of 2015, there was a documented increase in the number of arrests of Sudanese nationals, and there were stories of abuse in police custody (*ibid*). According to The Center for Refugee Solidarity, which was monitoring the situation at the time, the rising tensions between Egypt and Sudan were primarily due to accusations that Egypt was holding parliamentary elections in the Halayeb triangle, a disputed territory on the border between Sudan and Egypt (*ibid*). While Sudanese migrants and refugees in Egypt have previously benefited from historic ties and cultural affinities between the two countries, as well as from the 1976 Wadi al-Nil Agreement and increased cooperation between the Sudanese and Egyptian governments, in recent years, this recent rupture indicates that the Sudanese are just as susceptible as other nationalities when it comes to strained diplomatic relationships.

Comparing the case of Syrians with Ethiopian and Sudanese nationals illustrates the point that negative host state relations with a sending country can impact culturally similar and culturally dissimilar refugees alike. While culturally similar refugees (Syrians, and to some extent Sudanese) may receive preferable consideration, all refugees are at risk of exclusionary treatment should they be perceived as a security risk or if relations between their home state and Egypt become antagonistic.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This paper has examined life for refugees under a host state policy of ambivalence, where both formal and informal rules constrain certain behaviours and permit others. While participation in the informal Egyptian economy is permitted, overt forms of political expression are prohibited. Further, differential treatment is reserved to national groups depending on the host state/sending state ties and perceived cultural affinities, and yet all groups are subject to exclusionary treatment should diplomatic relations become strained. These findings have important implications for the literature on migration and refugees.

First, the literature on migration to developing host states tends to consider refugee outcomes as a blanket issue. This is partly because host government reactions to the presence of refugees in developing countries are assumed to be governed at least in part by international treaties, including the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which in theory applies to refugee groups uniformly. In this paper, I demonstrate that host state treatment of refugees in Egypt varies considerably by nationality. Both formal factors such as access to residency, employment or services, and the informal treatment of refugees often depend on an individual's country of origin.

Second, the findings from this paper are useful for rethinking mischaracterizations of developing host states as merely being “incapable” of engaging with refugees residing in their territory. This paper demonstrates that the Egyptian state is neither unaware of refugees nor entirely incapable of actively engaging with them, as proven by its occasional willingness to offer services and welcoming treatment to select groups of refugees. Specifically, supporting Syrian refugees was useful for Egypt under Mohammed Morsi’s presidency because of perceived domestic political gains. I argue that the Egyptian government is instead better characterized as “strategically ambivalent”, and this paper has explored the ramifications of ambivalence as a policy for refugees residing in Egypt. While ambivalence gives refugees the ability to informally participate economically and socially, the absence of any formal state protection can also mean that refugees are subject to xenophobia, inconsistent access to basic services, and, potentially, problems with the host state authorities.

This paper also provides a starting point from which to consider how refugees in other developing host states — those of the Middle East or other regions — manage under a regime of ambivalence. Does ambivalence exist as a blanket policy, or is it only directed only toward certain nationalities of refugees? Further, is ambivalence a viable long-term strategy, or only an initial policy employed when a state begins to encounter a growing refugee population? These questions provide fruitful avenues for further research.

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APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION

The data used for this study were collected using fifty-nine semi-structured interviews conducted in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt between 10 September and 30 November 2014. They were conducted on two levels.

The first set of interviews was with twenty-six government officials, policy planners at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and directors and staff members at foreign and Egyptian-run NGOs that focus at least in part on issues of migration and refugees.

A second set was conducted with thirty-three individual refugees of various nationalities, including Eritrean, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Congolese, Syrian and Central African Republican.

The government officials and INGO/NGO employees were asked about their role in engagement with refugees in the host state and, if applicable, how their organization interacts with the host state government. The refugee interview subjects were asked about how they navigate life in the host state on a day-to-day basis: whether they are able to access certain services or employment, whether they are subject to discrimination, and how they interact with organizations and state authorities.

Most government/NGO interviews were conducted in English, although some were conducted in Arabic or a combination of Arabic and English. Most refugee interviews were conducted in Arabic, though some were conducted in English or a combination of English and Arabic with intermittent switching throughout the interview. If the interview subjects allowed it, I created an audio recoding of the interview. If an interview subject preferred not to be recorded, I took notes during the interview and transcribed the interview subjects' responses immediately upon conclusion of the meeting.

I took a number of precautions in order to protect interview subject confidentiality. The government/NGO interview subjects were given the option to remain deidentified. I removed the names and positions of those individuals who chose this option when quoting them in this paper. Because refugees are considered to be vulnerable interview subjects according to IRB protocol, all refugee interviewees were automatically deidentified. This is especially important in the case of those who do not have official refugee or another legal status in Egypt.