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How do refugees navigate the UNHCR's bureaucracy? The role of rumours in accessing humanitarian aid and resettlement

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ABSTRACT

In conflict situations, rapid changes can occur in the conditions in both host and home countries. In the context of such uncertainty, how do refugees navigate the bureaucratic apparatus of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to obtain humanitarian aid and resettlement? We carried out fieldwork in 2019 in Lebanon and found the UNHCR's bureaucracy to be a 'black box' for refugees in relation to the provision of information on humanitarian aid and resettlement. In this context of limited information, we found that rumours – widely considered to be uncertain truths – contributed to shaping participants' understanding of the UNHCR's decisions on the provision of aid and resettlement. In this article, we highlight the interpretive aspect of rumours and argue that refugees engage in interpretive labour as a result of the unequal relationship between themselves and the UNHCR's opaque bureaucracy and provision of information. While refugees have to provide the UNHCR with detailed and highly personal information in interviews and household inspections, officers provide refugees with only generic responses, leading refugees to make their own interpretations of the bureaucratic decision-making processes. We conceptualise this interpretive labour as a collective process that contributes to generating rumours among refugee groups.

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Introduction

Refugees in states that are unwilling to secure their rights may be left in limbo, unable to plan for their future due to either neglect or explicitly restrictive policies and laws. Moreover, both host state policies and home country conditions can change rapidly in times of conflict. Under these uncertain conditions, how do refugees navigate the bureaucracy of international organisations to obtain humanitarian aid and access to resettlement? These questions proved vitally important to our research in Lebanon, where refugees (as considered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR) face myriad obstacles to regularising their status, creating further barriers for them to access work and earn their livelihoods. In this environment, refugees depend on international organisations like the UNHCR to obtain

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humanitarian aid and resettlement opportunities. However, neither aid nor resettlement is automatically available to all. The UNHCR in Lebanon makes a selection according to an unknown set of criteria and does not provide refugees with detailed information about their decision-making process. As an institution, the UNHCR is also limited by the host state, its donors and the embassies of resettlement states. However, refugees may not necessarily be aware of these complex power relations. From their perspective, the bureaucracy of the UNHCR – the main institution they face in order to access humanitarian aid and resettlement – can be seen as a ‘black box’, whose function is obscure and whose practices vary according to factors that appear mysterious.

This article aims to shed light on how refugees navigate these obscure processes, particularly in relation to the UNHCR in Lebanon. Lebanon offers a prototypical case study to analyse non-Convention states with high numbers of refugees and no comprehensive political framework (Nassar and Stel 2019; Sanyal 2018; Stel 2020). Currently, Syrian refugees constitute the largest proportion of the country’s refugee population, with the government estimating the presence of 1.5 million Syrians in the country (UNHCR 2020a, 2020b). They represent the greatest number of refugees per capita in the world and account for up to a quarter of Lebanon’s population.¹ Following the Syrians, there are more than 200,000 Palestinian refugees, 14,000 Iraqis, 2000 Sudanese and another 2000 refugees of other nationalities. Lebanon is UNHCR’s ‘largest single-country operation’ (UNHCR 2018). We carried out our fieldwork in Lebanon in 2019, conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 26 asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and Iraq in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, South Lebanon and Western Beqaa. The results showed that rumours contributed to shaping the refugees’ decision-making processes while navigating the UNHCR’s bureaucracy in order to access aid or resettlement.

For the purposes of this article, we define rumours as *a collective process through which those facing an ambiguous situation negotiate verified and unverified information, perceptions, and assumptions through different means, including word of mouth and social media, to interpret this situation*. We highlight the interpretive aspect of rumours, colloquially understood as information of uncertain truth. We argue that rumours are often an expression of interpretive labour for refugees attempting to better navigate the UNHCR’s decision-making processes in the domains of aid and resettlement. To clarify our conceptual framework, we first explore the existing scholarly debates on bureaucratic violence, humanitarianism and the emergence of rumours, and their role in navigating bureaucracies. We then explain our methodology, provide information on the practices of the UNHCR and its centrality for Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and analyse our findings in two main areas: navigating access to selective aid distribution and resettlement. Our findings challenge the assumption that rumours are merely unverified truths that refugees passively receive and act upon without question. Instead, we show how refugees actively engage in interpretations that, aside from contributing to rumours, serve to challenge the validity of these rumours.

Bureaucratic violence and humanitarianism as fertile grounds for rumours

Organisations like the UNHCR are bureaucracies as their decision-making is based on impersonal and generalised rules, and they embody rational-legal authority and control technical expertise and information, including quantifying populations and standardising practices

(Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Best 2012). In this sense, bureaucracies are potent institutions. They set the rules for creating and legitimising social categories. However, they are also notorious for their irrational practices, for acting in ways that are in conflict with their stated mission and for disregarding those to whom they are officially responsible – what Barnett and Finnemore (1999) conceptualise as ‘institutional pathologies’. In her research with urban refugees in Kampala, Uganda, Sandvik (2011) found that the UNHCR has institutional pathologies, such as the inadequate bureaucratic capacity to deal with refugees’ problems, refugees’ grievances and uncertainties around accessing resettlement, for example. The existing scholarship attests that the UNHCR’s insufficient bureaucratic capacity stems from a lack of adequate funding, an often-stressful working environment, and the obligation to meet refugees’ needs while ensuring compliance with the headquarters’ standards. For instance, in her report for UNHCR on its organisational culture, Barb Wigley (2005, p. 19) states:

Almost universally, field staff pointed out that the amount of time required to comply with HQ demands significantly interferes with their ability to meet the needs of refugees in their care, creating an image of an organisation inadvertently sabotaging its own core purpose.

The scholarship on refugee interactions with the UNHCR’s decision makers finds that long periods of waiting, limited knowledge about the processes involved, and unpredictable outcomes create a protracted uncertainty – a position that renders refugees disempowered vis-à-vis authorities like the UNHCR (Biehl 2015; Espinoza 2018). The scholarship is particularly abundant on refugee experiences around resettlement (Horst 2006; Sandvik 2011; Sandvik 2009; Thomson 2012). Sandvik (2011) finds that refugees experience “international protection” as something that was actively and deliberately being withheld from them – either through “delaying tactics”, incompetence, or malice. In other cases, refugees believe that the UNHCR’s decision to resettle them is entirely in the hands of the case officers (Biehl 2015). Overall, the literature shows that because the UNHCR’s decision-making is not transparent for applicants, refugees find themselves in need of clarification. Some refugees may accuse UNHCR officers of corruption, or other refugees of lying or amplifying their suffering in a way that they believe can facilitate their resettlement (Sandvik 2011, p. 19).

We contend with this scholarship that refugee interpretations of how the UNHCR works in practice are not created out of thin air. In addition to a lack of understanding of the decision-making process, the actual or potential application of discretion constitutes the basis of structural violence between bureaucrats and applicants. This is also referred to in the literature as ‘bureaucratic violence’ (Näre 2020; Graeber 2012). It is important to note that refugees are already subjected to multiple forms of bureaucratic violence. Their country of origin may require them to travel back to maintain their land or properties or to pay large amounts of money to obtain or renew passports at embassies. Host states may create obstacles to make it difficult for refugees to acquire residency or work permits. Ambivalent or inadequate immigration and asylum policies may push refugees into the informal sector. On top of this, the UNHCR may require refugees to wait for their assessment for selective humanitarian aid and resettlement, often for long periods. This ‘bureaucratic violence’ is at the root of the perceptions of applicants that bureaucratic practices are inexplicable or unreasonable. Thus, we argue that this illegibility requires applicants to engage in ‘interpretive labour’, a process in which the subordinate puts time and effort into understanding the dominant party’s point of view and the workings of the relationship that connects them (Graeber 2012). However, the dominant party in this relationship does not need to reciprocate

these interpretive labour-related efforts. We conceptualise this interpretive labour as generating a source for rumours.

The early literature on this topic addressed the interpretive aspect of rumours. During World War II, American psychologists investigated the reasons behind the spread of rumours, arguing that rumours emerged because human beings need to find a meaningful way of explaining their environment (Knapp 1944) and understanding the factors that underlie situations that they perceive as ambiguous (Allport and Postman 1946). Although such studies pointed to the interpretive aspect of rumours, they also considered rumours to be indicative of 'neurotic traits' and a danger to society. Consequently, researchers looked for ways of controlling them (Allport and Postman 1947; Knapp 1944). In contrast, sociologists conceptualised rumours as 'collective transactions' (Shibutani 1966), developed to direct a group facing an ambiguous situation. Rumours emerge as information, hypotheses and explanations that one accesses through others. These resources are merged and reflected upon to construct a common interpretation of a situation that guides a group to act in a certain way (Miller 2005).

If rumours are understood as a collective interpretation process rather than as circulated information passively received by the group in question, refugees can be seen as 'interpreters' rather than mere 'conduits of information' (Perice 1997). Scholars investigating the use of rumours by refugees highlight the collective and interpretive aspect of this use (Turner 2004; Moulin 2010; Jack 2018). For instance, engagement in rumouring has been examined as an act of agency through which refugees can express their voice (Moulin 2010; Jack 2018) and 'create some sort of order' in their uncertain lives (Turner 2004). We acknowledge that refugee engagement as active interpreters in the process of rumouring can expose them to inaccurate information. This can exacerbate their fears and uncertainties (Evans 2010) or lead them to pursue actions that prevent them from accessing needed aid and support (Jack 2018). Moreover, we emphasise the fluid and dynamic character of rumours, which are continuously modified, re-interpreted and questioned (Perice 1997; Nordstrom and Robben 1996) as they circulate through word of mouth (Jack 2018; Perice 1997) or via social media platforms (Dekker and Engbersen 2014).

The literature has also investigated the reasons behind the emergence and spread of rumours. Most studies identify vague and uncertain situations as providing fertile ground for rumours. Studies on the use and spread of rumours in general (Allport and Postman 1946; Knapp 1944; Shibutani 1966) and those with a specific focus on rumours in the context of migration (Saltsman 2010; Jack 2018; Mcconnachie 2014) and political violence (Perice 1997; Nordstrom and Robben 1996) have concluded that a lack of information is the primary reason for individuals and groups using and relying on rumours. Refugees have been found to rely on rumours because they perceive official sources of information, including government institutions and international aid organisations, as untrustworthy (Carlson, Jakli, and Linos 2018; Saltsman 2012; Jack 2018; Horst and Grabska 2015). According to Carlson, Jakli, and Linos (2018), the 'bureaucratic limitations' of the ability of 'governments and aid organisations' to manage migration-related crises lead to 'information vacuums'. They identify various bureaucratic practices that leave refugees with inadequate information on important topics such as frequent policy changes, limits on information and arbitrary policy implementation by bureaucrats.

This evidence highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between the two groups of actors, bureaucracies and refugees, and brings up the question whether

international organisations are similarly mistrusted by refugees. Based on this framework, we explore how refugees navigate their interactions with the UNHCR and how rumours emerge and develop in this process. The present study conceptualises the relationship between the UNHCR's practices and refugees' use of rumours as relationships of exchange. In contrast to the detailed and highly personalised information refugees have to provide in various interviews and household inspections, the UNHCR's generic (and often uninformative) responses leave the former to interpret the results by themselves. We argue that rumours among refugees emerge as the product of this interpretive labour.

Methods and fieldwork

We conducted the fieldwork for this study between April and September 2019. We organised 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers living in urban and peri-urban areas and towns and villages located in both central and peripheral regions of Lebanon. Of these interviews, 19 were conducted with Syrian men and women living in Beirut (Hamra, Salim Salam and Tariq Al Jdideh), Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon (Tripoli and Abu Samra), and West Beqaa (Bar Elias, Deir Zanon, Ghazza and Joub Jannine), and seven were carried out with Iraqi men and women living in South Lebanon (Nabatieh) and Mount Lebanon (Sad Al Bouchrieh). All Syrian and Iraqi interviewees lived in rented apartments or rooms, except for two Syrian interviewees who lived in informal tented settlements in West Beqaa.

Participants were recruited both directly and indirectly. We contacted Syrian refugees living in the Hamra area of Beirut directly. Despite being known as one of Beirut's most central and affluent regions, many Syrian refugees live there by virtue of circumventing Hamra's high rental prices and housing by living in old and abandoned buildings. Familiar with the location, the research team identified two buildings that housed Syrian refugees and that were known by civil society organisations. These buildings were in a derelict condition, in contrast to the average buildings where Syrians lived, and were known as 'Syrian buildings'. The team introduced themselves to residents, explained the study and scheduled interviews with families who were willing to participate. We reached out to Syrian interviewees in West Beqaa, North Lebanon and Mount Lebanon through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with refugees and migrants, and through refugees who had been volunteering with different NGOs. Iraqi refugees living in Sad Al Bouchrieh were recruited through the Committee for Displaced Iraqis in Lebanon, an unofficial organisation advocating for Iraqi refugees. This organisation works mainly with Christian Iraqis who sought refuge in Lebanon following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. We also reached out to Shia Iraqis who lived mainly in South Lebanon. We contacted the Iraqi community in Nabatieh, where a research team member had previously established contacts. Interviews took at least two hours and included questions around experiences with UNHCR registration, status determination (if any), provision of humanitarian aid and third-country resettlement, and navigating life in Lebanon, including mobility restrictions, access to income opportunities, housing, health and education.

While in-depth, semi-structured interviews were useful to understand how interviewees interpreted the UNHCR's practices, we acknowledge that a more comprehensive ethnographic methodology could offer greater insight into how these interpretations are developed and negotiated over what seems like a long-term relationship with the UNHCR. We

thus acknowledge the limitations of relying on interview data whose relatively small sample size prevents us from generalising the results. While we conducted a total of 26 interviews, in reality, we met far more people. Because we undertook the interviews mostly inside houses, other family members and, in some cases, neighbours and friends, attended most interviews. This research setting allowed us to understand the centrality of UNHCR-related conversations among family members, to identify members who are involved in UNHCR-related tasks (such as preparing the paperwork, and calling and visiting the offices) and to observe how different members reacted to the information and interpretations provided by the interviewee with regards to the UNHCR. In order to maintain meaningful consent, we did not offer any material incentives to potential interviewees. However, because we carried out most interviews inside homes, we took some food along to accompany our conversations.

In our meetings, we ensured that we presented ourselves as academic researchers who were in no way associated with the UNHCR. We informed interviewees that their participation in the research would not affect any form of assistance that they were receiving or might receive in the future from the UNHCR or other aid organisations. We highlighted this fact at different stages of the process, including during recruitment, during scheduling and confirmation of interviews, and when receiving the interviewee's consent. This clarification helped to dispel possible doubts held by interviewees. As a result, we believe that most interviewees were comfortable sharing their interpretations of the UNHCR's practices. They informed us that they avoided discussing such issues with UNHCR employees in person because they perceived it as risky behaviour that might lead them to lose access to UNHCR assistance. However, the fact that a few interviewees had suspicions that we worked for the UNHCR, and insisted on showing their need to obtain aid or resettlement, indicates the extent to which these systems are malleable and arbitrary, leading to people believing that anyone could change their situation at any time.

The centrality of UNHCR's protection for Syrians and Iraqis

Before we commence our analysis, it is important to provide some contextual information on the UNHCR's practices and their centrality for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. Michael Kagan (2011) depicts the UNHCR as acting like a 'surrogate state' in the Middle East as it is officially responsible for many tasks, including registration, refugee status determination and the provision of assistance. Like many other states in the Middle East, Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. In the absence of comprehensive legislation and a well-functioning framework on asylum in Lebanon, the UNHCR operates based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed with Lebanon's General Security in 2003. While reaffirming Lebanon's position as a non-asylum country, this MOU provides for the temporary protection of asylum seekers and refugees, and obliges the UNHCR to resettle refugees within one year of their registration (Frangieh 2016). Moreover, the MOU allocates responsibility to the UNHCR to meet the socio-economic needs of refugees (Article 14, as per Frangieh 2016). The MOU's transfer of responsibility to the UNHCR in Lebanon makes the institution central for refugees to access livelihoods and resettlement. Indeed, when asked about the reasons that made them register with the UNHCR, most interviewees told us that they did so to receive assistance or apply to resettle in a third country.

Registration with the UNHCR does not, however, provide refugees with a residency permit. According to the MOU, refugees can obtain a circulation permit, valid for up to a year, but in practice, the General Security has not systematically issued this permit (Frangieh 2016). Considering the very few resettlement places available, many refugees risk staying in Lebanon for many years with no durable solution unless they voluntarily repatriate. Non-resettled refugees are considered irregular migrants under Lebanese law and are subject to the provisions laid out in Chapter IX of the 1962 Law, rendering them vulnerable to deportation. Although Lebanon is arguably bound by the customary law principle of *non-refoulement* (Janmyr 2016; Aranki and Kalis 2014), in practice deportation remains a significant threat.

It is important to note that not all refugees are subject to the same procedures to attest their refugeehood nor do they have equal opportunities to access assistance and resettlement. Their histories of asylum in Lebanon are also different. For instance, Iraqi refugees started arriving in Lebanon as early as 1997 in the aftermath of the Gulf War, with few being recognised as refugees (CARITAS 2014; Trad and Frangieh 2007). Hundreds of them were detained and deported from Lebanon (Trad and Frangieh 2007). Following the 2003 US invasion, the region experienced a gradual influx of Iraqi refugees. The UNHCR sought to protect Iraqi refugees through different approaches. The first was temporary protection implemented from 2003 to 2006, and the second was *prima facie* recognition (except for those from Iraqi Kurdistan and those falling under the Convention's exclusion clauses) starting from December 2006 (Janmyr 2018, p. 400). As was the case for temporary protection, the UNHCR implemented the *prima facie* approach without having agreed upon this with the Lebanese government, who continued to consider Iraqi refugees in Lebanon to be 'illegal migrants' (Trad and Frangieh 2007). A new wave of Iraqi Christian refugees arrived in the country in late 2014 and 2015, following the mass offensive launched by ISIS.

In contrast, a significant number of Syrians (estimated at around 300,000) were already working in Lebanon before the war (ILO 2015). There was a high degree of mobility between the two states due to the Bilateral Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination, signed between Syria and Lebanon in 1993.² Under this agreement, those who had a valid Syrian identity card could enter and reside in Lebanon for up to six months, renewable for another six months for free. Syrians often worked as low-salaried seasonal labourers in agriculture, construction and services. They constituted a crucial part of the labour force in Lebanon. While their presence in the country was invisible, it was largely tolerated as they benefitted the wealthy Lebanese and worked hard without any political or social rights (Chalcraft 2009). The war fundamentally disrupted the migrant workers' place in Lebanon, and the free movement of Syrians became increasingly restricted as conflicts rapidly intensified.

Following the uprisings and growing conflicts in Syria, the UNHCR started accelerated processing for Syrians. All Syrian applicants were subject to a short screening interview before receiving a registration certificate. Although the UNHCR did not declare *prima facie* recognition for Syrians, it described the flight of civilians from Syria as a 'refugee movement' (UNHCR 2012) and applied what can be considered 'a policy of *de facto prima facie* refugee status determination' (Janmyr 2018, p. 400). The Lebanese government initially tolerated the arrival of Syrians but the growing number of border crossings, the attacks in Aarsal in early August 2014, and the fear of a spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon were followed by an increasingly restrictive approach towards Syrians, particularly after 2014. In

January 2015, the government decided to stop its visa-free policy for Syrians and since then has issued a series of decisions and circulars to restrict Syrians from entering and staying in Lebanon. In May 2015, the Ministry of Social Affairs also requested the UNHCR to suspend all new registrations of Syrians. Since then, Syrians who approach the UNHCR cannot receive a registration certificate but are given a 'counselling appointment' where they are issued appointment slips and a barcode (*shifra*), which enables them to access UNHCR assistance.

In this environment, where there are obstacles to obtaining residency and work permits, refugees depend for their survival on humanitarian assistance and resettlement to third countries. However, both processes are not available to all and hinge on a set of criteria, which includes nationality. For example, the UNHCR's aid system has largely benefitted 'vulnerable' Syrian refugees and some Iraqis. On the other hand, the UNHCR has facilitated the resettlement of Iraqis more than Syrians. For instance, between 2012 and 2019, 60,275 Iraqis were resettled to third countries, while this number was 59,685 for Syrians.³ Given the significantly higher number of Syrian refugees, we can conclude that Iraqi refugees benefitted more from resettlement than Syrians. However, the exact criteria used for the two systems are not transparent and cannot be challenged by refugees themselves.

In the following sections, we explore how refugees navigate the UNHCR's obscure system of aid distribution and resettlement. We find that the authorities reportedly do not provide refugees with detailed explanations of their procedures. Because of the asymmetrical power relations between officers and refugees, the latter need to engage in what Graeber (2012) referred to as 'interpretive labour' to understand how the system works. In both areas, we argue that rumours arise as an outcome of this collective interpretation process.

Navigating access to selective aid distribution

As Lisa Malkki (1996) suggested, not all refugees are seen to have the same worth. The visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of refugeehood is related to a particular institutional expectation of what a refugee is supposed to be. Humanitarian organisations select to whom they provide assistance and, by doing so, construct refugeehood and the idea that refugees are needy. In Lebanon, the UNHCR's aid distribution system does not operate equally for all refugees either. It varies according to nationality, family size and a range of other factors that change according to the 'vulnerability assessment' system initiated in 2012. Under this system, each file is supposed to be assessed according to vulnerability indicators at the registration interview and, if the UNHCR considers the family to be in a vulnerable situation, during a subsequent household visit or in the following renewal appointments. Either UNHCR field officers or its partner NGOs make these 'home visits' to assess the individual's or family's needs and decide whether to provide aid. Since 2012, the main targets have been Syrian refugees, with some Iraqis but few – if any – other nationalities.

Because the system is selective, it is not clear whether any particular refugee will receive aid or not (Ho Thanh 2019). Applicants may receive assistance for some time, in some cases only for a few months.⁴ The UNHCR may then cease to provide it, without explanation. The assessments are calculated based on variables including, but not limited to, data on the arrival date, household size, gender of the head of the household, dependency ratios, and number of members with disabilities and specific needs. The exact formula changes according to an annual survey of vulnerability indicators (Government of Lebanon and the United Nations 2020). Because the exact selection criteria and their weighted average formula are

unclear and not publicly available, it is difficult for outsiders, including implementing partners and refugees, to understand how the system works. In this section, we argue that the UNHCR's opaque and selective system of aid distribution directs refugees into another layer of interpretive labour, a process in which rumours emerge in an attempt to better understand situations that they perceive as obscure.

In our research, all of our interviewees, including those who were confident of their knowledge of the UNHCR's decision-making processes, expressed confusion when discussing UNHCR's aid provision. According to a Syrian refugee who was active in many international NGOs and who reported attending meetings in which UNHCR officials shared their aid distribution criteria, the criteria remain mysterious. This is especially so when finding out that families who, in his opinion, should qualify as most vulnerable, are not receiving any aid:

When you go and ask the UNHCR in Zahleh, they would tell you that such decisions are taken in the Beirut office. When you ask the Beirut office, they tell you that the person is still registered; they have his file, but he is not entitled to receive aid. This issue confuses me a lot. Do they really have certain criteria based on which they take such decisions, or is it a random process? I really don't know.⁵

Many of our interviewees who did not receive aid or who received it only for some time mentioned that the UNHCR did not provide them with any reasons either. In the words of a Syrian family, 'when they stop, they don't give any explanation and only say this is the only thing they can do.'⁶ Another reason the UNHCR stops giving to refugees, we were told, was the lack of funding. Understandably, the UNHCR's budget is limited. However, not explaining the process that they undertake to make these decisions renders the subject incomprehensible for refugees and a fertile ground for rumours.

A common rumour we heard in our fieldwork was, 'if you keep asking, you may receive some aid', attesting that refugees were required to constantly demonstrate their neediness (Malkki 1996). It is important to add that asking the UNHCR for aid or resettlement is not an easy task, as refugees often need to wait in front of the UNHCR office for long hours or call them repeatedly, usually costing them a day off work and travel and communication expenses. Still, many refugees tried to reach the UNHCR multiple times to obtain some aid. This persistence also indicates that refugees are active agents trying to understand how the system works and devise their strategies accordingly (see Grabska 2006). Indeed, many of our respondents continued to ask the UNHCR for aid, with some of them receiving a positive response, although they did not know how long the aid would last. For example, a Syrian refugee explained that the UNHCR gave her family some food vouchers for six months and then stopped, telling them that this was because they lived in Hamra. Although this family lived in Hamra, an affluent area of Beirut, they were renting a flat in a derelict building. After being rejected for aid, the mother kept going to the UNHCR for two years asking for aid and subsequently received food vouchers for nine months. The family believes that they started receiving aid again because of their persistence, even though it was short-lived.

A similar belief that making repeated appeals to the UNHCR could help with some aid was common among Iraqi refugees. As a Shia Iraqi refugee told us:

I think the UNHCR started giving us food vouchers now because we complained many times that we don't get any aid whereas Syrians get all the support. I guess they considered these complaints and decided to start giving us aid, or maybe because they wanted us to stop complaining. Maybe they will give it to us for a while and then cut us off again.⁷

Indeed, a common complaint among Iraqi interviewees was the selective nature of the aid distribution based on nationality. The Committee for Displaced Iraqis was established to create awareness about (mainly Christian) Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and make claims to the UNHCR, as well as churches, the Iraqi Embassy and international and local NGOs. Members of the committee informed us that they asked the UNHCR multiple times to treat Iraqi refugees the same as Syrians but that they received no satisfactory answer.

The fate of others acting upon this same rumour, however, brings its veracity into question. The same interviewee, for instance, believed that complaining could also have adverse consequences, such as loss of support, resettlement opportunities or even refugee status:

Our relationship with the UNHCR is tricky. We can't complain a lot or voice our concerns. If we do, they might close our files or take away our refugee certificate. Many Iraqis who got involved in protests to voice their concerns and talked about their difficult living situations in Lebanon were dismissed from the UNHCR. Once, an Iraqi person went on live television to ask for donations because his child needed an operation, the UNHCR dismissed him and closed his file. We don't know the actual reason behind this, so we just remain quiet. We prefer not to risk being dismissed or have our files closed or our refugee certificate taken from us.⁸

Some participants had heard from their friends that if the UNHCR learned that there was a man in the family, they would not give any financial aid. As a Syrian refugee recounted, 'My parents registered with the UNHCR. My brothers and I did not register because we started to hear people saying that the UNHCR will suspend my parents if we do register. My parents were in dire need of assistance, so we did not want to put them at risk.'⁹ Some of our respondents attested to the 'truth' of these rumours by explaining what happened afterwards. In this case, for example, when the interviewee's brother tried to register on his parents' file eight months later, his father received a message saying that their food assistance had been suspended the very next day. Although we cannot confirm the 'truth' of this account, or whether there was another reason for the UNHCR to stop providing aid on that very day, it is clear that the volatility of the system, the lack of information about who receives aid, and the constant revisions have led to these interpretations.

The selective nature of aid distribution has also created rumours around who received aid and who was seen to be deserving of doing so. The performative dimension of refugee-hood (Malkki 1996) requires refugees to show their neediness in interviews and house visits. In a selective economy of care and compassion, the question of who deserves aid and who does not is becoming commonplace (Fassin 2005; Casati 2018) and was the case in our research in Lebanon. Some of those who had arrived earlier criticised the newcomers, arguing that they were not 'real refugees'. In contrast, some who arrived later, particularly after 2015, complained that 'old refugees' were not 'really refugees' anymore because they were settled in Lebanon. All 'old refugees', or those who had the certificate, were believed to have access to aid, whereas those with *shifra* did not. One Syrian refugee expressed this view:

New arrivals [those who came after 2015] need this aid more than old refugees who are now settled in Lebanon. Yet, you see the UNHCR still giving aid to old refugees and nothing to the new ones. Most of these registered refugees should not be considered refugees in the first place. They are settled in Lebanon and live comfortably. They still receive monetary support to cover their rent, food vouchers, education for their kids, and they are not paying for anything.¹⁰

Moreover, this selective economy has created an environment of distrust among refugees and has led them to accuse others of lying. One Syrian refugee explained that some refugees were allegedly renting dilapidated flats to show during UNHCR house visits so as to access aid, while in practice they were staying elsewhere. Another person told us that they heard of refugees who owned multiple cars and savings but still received UNHCR aid. One of the leaders of an informal tented settlement in Bar Elias complained that his relatives and other residents in the settlement accused him of taking bribes from the UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations. This person worked as an interlocutor for humanitarians and researchers who wanted to assess the situation for refugees in the area and was, therefore, in regular contact with various organisations. As he was always busy meeting with humanitarian workers and possibly because he lived in what was the most comfortable tent, relatively speaking, in the area, other residents believed he was benefitting from the aid system. The selective aid system has also created a fear of non-refugees, with people thinking that outsiders can make their own interpretations and influence the UNHCR's decision. As one Syrian refugee told us:

One time, my friend [a concierge in a building nearby] was interviewed by a lady. She didn't say that she worked with the UNHCR; she said that this was just research. Later, he found out that she gave her report to the UNHCR, and he was cut off. They stopped giving him aid; that's why now everyone is afraid to speak to strangers.¹¹

When refugees asked why their assistance had stopped, the UNHCR's responses seemed generic, offering too little information, and therefore unhelpful, resulting in more interpretive labour for refugees. In one case, refugees were told that they were temporarily suspended from aid because they had already received their share and that the UNHCR had to assist other refugees. In another case, the UNHCR informed an interviewee that they were not providing her with aid because they did not have enough funding. When refugees tried to challenge the UNHCR's responses, they were reportedly met with criticism. One Syrian interviewee, a single mother of one living in a shared house with another family, who previously worked for NGOs, said:

I asked them why they stopped the food assistance, and they justified it by referring to limited funding. I started an argument. [...] I told them you are not a small NGO, and the reasons you are providing me are not convincing. You are assisting families that include more than seven members. You should change this system. You should start to study each family's case, and you should support a maximum of five members per family. [...] They were really annoyed when they heard my comments, and they told me that I am nobody and that I am not knowledgeable enough to give them suggestions.¹²

Given that there was no publicly available information on who received assistance, and because the assessments changed sporadically, refugees interpreted the system depending on their circumstances, where they lived and with whom they communicated. Similar rumours prevailed about the resettlement process, as we discuss below.

Navigating access to the resettlement lottery

The scholarship on UNHCR resettlement shows that the process is not transparent, lacks accountability and occurs in a legal void (de Boer and Zieck 2020). Garnier, Sandvik, and Jubilut (2018) conceptualise resettlement as humanitarian governance where the

resettlement states and the UNHCR operate with a humanitarian ethos of helping the neediest while refraining from being accountable. In this system, refugees are only provided with the possibility of a resettlement 'opportunity', but they cannot challenge any of the actors as to why they are not chosen. Moreover, this opportunity is a myth for many due to the scarcity of available slots. The process of resettlement is therefore permeated with unequal power relations between resettlement states, the UNHCR and the implementing partners who refer or choose some refugees over others in what becomes a very lengthy, costly and emotionally intense process for refugees.

In Lebanon, the implementing partners and UNHCR field officers can identify potential refugees at the initial stage. UNHCR resettlement officers then conduct at least one interview to confirm their willingness and seek further information to verify that they meet the criteria determined by resettlement states. After the UNHCR has made its decision, which usually takes months, resettlement state officers interview the applicant again. Thus, refugees who wish to be resettled need to pass through several selection stages without knowing the details of the decision-making process. Previous research shows that UNHCR and government institutions may be reluctant to provide refugees with detailed information about the resettlement process in the belief that doing so would lead to an increase in fraudulent resettlement requests (Saltsman 2012). This suggests that international organisations perceive refugees as 'untrustworthy subjects' (Thomson 2012). In this section, we argue that rumours about resettlement are partly a result of the opacity of the process, the absence of publicly available information and the generic responses given by officers.

A closer examination of our interviewees' interpretations of officers' responses helps to explain their reliance on rumours to navigate this process. According to our interviewees, officers gave two main categories of responses when rejecting applicants. In the first category, the UNHCR told the applicant that s/he did not meet the eligibility criteria for resettlement but did not explain what the criteria were, which led to further speculation. Previous research shows that the most trusted sources of information for migrants are people with whom they have social ties, particularly family members (Misztal 2000). All our interviewees had obtained their knowledge of this process from what they heard from others or from their observations of resettled families. Almost everyone we spoke to had their own ideas about the specific categories of people that the UNHCR was supposedly selecting. Single Syrian men, for instance, speculated that the UNHCR chose families. Even though this appears to have been mostly correct in practice, especially for single Iraqi and Syrian men (Turner 2017), there was no evidence to support other rumours such as the UNHCR preferring families with large numbers of children. The participants often compared their own situations with what they believed the criteria to be and, certain that they fitted more than one criterion, felt that they should have been resettled.

In the second category of rejection responses, UNHCR officers refrained from taking responsibility and emphasised that it was not them, but the relevant embassies, that were the primary decision makers. Our respondents believed that this strategy was used to silence their demands and to relieve the officers of their resettlement-related responsibilities. With the exception of one Iraqi interviewee, this answer did not seem to convince anyone. Instead, many people thought that the UNHCR had a significant say in the process and that embassies alone did not make decisions. This conviction appears to derive from their own experience with the resettlement process or from what they had heard from others. In support of this belief, an Iraqi respondent recounted the following narrative:

Three years ago, I went to UNHCR to renew my refugee certificate, and I met a few men while waiting there. They told me the Embassies of Canada and the US accepted them for resettlement. However, UNHCR was delaying the process, as it took so long to finalise the required documents. So, they protested in front of their office in Beirut. After that, when they went back for a follow-up, UNHCR told them their files were closed, and they were dismissed.¹³

As we have previously suggested, the ambiguity around the UNHCR's practices leads refugees to speculate about resettlement criteria, question the UNHCR's adherence to these criteria and perceive the UNHCR as deceiving them when it presents itself as having no say in the process. One Syrian interviewee thought that the UNHCR was the main actor responsible in the process, and that she could not challenge their decision. In her words, the UNHCR interviewed her once for resettlement but then rejected her nine months later with no further explanation:

They told me that the embassy had refused my application. I smelled something fishy in their response as this is not how the UNHCR usually accepts or refuses one's application for resettlement. [...] Even when they told me that I was rejected, they simply said that the embassy declined me without specifying which embassy did so.¹⁴

Another interviewee described the process as unjust as she could not understand the UNHCR's insistence on resettling families who refused to be resettled while ignoring families who repeatedly expressed their willingness to be resettled.¹⁵

A Syrian man who had been volunteering with humanitarian organisations informed us of a rumour that the UNHCR only resettled those who were well connected. While he did not believe this rumour himself, he attributed it to some of the humanitarian organisations' practices:

You hear a certain type of rumour among those who were not resettled. For example, they start to think this family was accepted because it has connections or because its members have good persuasion skills and were able to convince the UNHCR. People now think those who were resettled had a comparative advantage over others. As a person who is connected to humanitarian organisations, a number of my family members have asked me for resettlement-related favours. They would ask me to give their file number to the UNHCR and tell them to prioritise us for resettlement. I try to explain that this is not how things work, but they won't believe me.¹⁶

Others heard rumours that achieving resettlement involved more than social connections and that those who were seeking resettlement needed to pay significant sums of money to brokers who were connected to UNHCR employees. As one Syrian interviewee stated:

When I registered with the UNHCR, my friends told me that brokers control resettlement programmes. These brokers usually have a deal with UNHCR employees. Brokers identify Syrian refugees who want to travel and collect 3000 USD per person. Both they and the UNHCR employee get a percentage. So, for example, the UNHCR employee has 20 places for resettlement. He contacts the broker and asks if he has identified any Syrians. If, for example, the broker has the name of a Syrian refugee who was registered in 2016, but this person paid 3000 USD, he would tell the UNHCR employee. The employee would then place this man's file among the files that are eligible for resettlement. Although people who registered in 2011 and 2012 are more eligible for resettlement than those who registered later, the files are reshuffled based on who paid more and who has a better broker. The process is completely corrupt. I have a friend who was resettled to Germany this way. I know many who paid 2000–3000 USD or even 3500 USD. They pay because this is the safest way to leave Lebanon.¹⁷

In our research, we found no evidence of collaboration between UNHCR employees and brokers in Lebanon. However, rumours about the possibility of bribery were still widespread because of the inherent ambiguity of the system and a lack of information about the selection criteria.

Such rumours were so widespread that several travel agencies emerged as fake brokers and exploited the desperation of the refugees. A female Syrian interviewee told us that she was ready to try any available opportunity. She heard from another woman that her husband had applied for resettlement to France through a travel agency in the Ras Al Naba'a area of Beirut. After speaking with her, she decided to go to this travel agency and provide them with her family's UNHCR registration certificates. In her view, the travel agency seemed to be working perfectly fine. An employee translated all of their documents into French, asked her to pay 50 USD per person, and told her to take those documents to the officer at the front desk of the French Embassy. When this interviewee took the documents to the Embassy, the officer at the front desk reportedly accepted them and did not say anything. They later followed up with the travel agency who said that the French Embassy might take months to respond and left the family with no further information. Although in this case the family did not have to spend a large amount of their savings, the lengthy wait time to hear from the UNHCR teamed with their desperate desire to leave Lebanon resulted in the emergence of rumours around such fake agencies.

Rumours also persisted among refugees that some refugees falsified or exaggerated their situation in interviews with the UNHCR in order to be resettled. Some refugees told us that many families allegedly lied to the UNHCR that they had been detained, tortured or suffered from illnesses and disabilities because of the war – reasons, they understood, that the UNHCR considered when making resettlement decisions. As one refugee in Bar Elias explained, an eager Syrian friend of his found that his newborn child had a mild heart defect, which in his words was not a severe condition. As soon as he learned about this illness, his friend went to the UNHCR three to four times a month asking for his family to be resettled. He also reportedly mentioned that his daughter was urinating involuntarily because of war-related trauma. After persisting for two years at the UNHCR, he managed to get resettled in Switzerland. It is obviously impossible to know how the UNHCR officers perceived such persistence and how they assessed this particular application. It is also impossible to evaluate the severity of the illnesses that were mentioned. However, what is evident is that refugees tried to understand the UNHCR's decision-making process through the rumours that they heard and through their shared interpretation.

Conclusion

The explicit aims of this article have been to understand how refugees experience and perceive the path to humanitarian aid and resettlement, and how rumours emerge and develop in this process. We have found that rumours emerge among refugees not because they are 'irrational' or 'gullible' but because they often have to live in uncertain conditions (Williams and Baláz 2012) and in an environment of 'information precarity' (Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek 2017), forcing them to navigate the processes of humanitarian organisations by trying to understand how they work. It is important to note that the UNHCR has its own shortcomings in disseminating information. It is limited by the pressures from the host state

government, its donors and the embassies of resettlement states. Yet our analysis does not attempt to explain why the UNHCR acts in the way it does. We instead focus our attention on what conditions these opaque systems create for refugees. We have argued that in the face of being provided with little or no information, these systems oblige refugees to perform interpretive labour to navigate the black box of the UNHCR's decision-making process and that rumours are a product of this labour. We have also found that the process of rumour-making is not straightforward. Rumours can emerge after someone has heard about or observed a specific incident involving other refugees and can therefore be seen as a lesson learned. Alternatively, rumours can develop from pre-existing prejudiced beliefs about international organisations, such as the UNHCR, which are seen as remote or powerful institutions.

At first glance, these findings may indicate that the UNHCR could reduce the emergence of rumours in conflict situations by providing potential applicants with more detailed information about its processes. Indeed, the UNHCR should provide clear explanations of how the various components of the distribution of humanitarian aid and resettlement slots work in practice. However, we are not claiming that better access to information alone can prevent the emergence of rumours. Even with access to information, rumours afford an ontological sense of safety in times of uncertainty. Nevertheless, failure to provide detailed information or offering only generic responses that shift responsibility to other institutions (funders and resettlement states in this case), clearly increases the vulnerability and susceptibility of refugees to rumouring. Unless international organisations are held accountable for their opacity and they address their asymmetrical power relationship with refugees, and unless the uncertainty surrounding refugees is reduced, rumours will likely continue to shape how refugees navigate these processes.

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Notes

1. According to the UNHCR's records in 2020, only 914,648 Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with the UNHCR (UNHCR 2020a, 2020b). Note that UNHCR statistics exclude those who could not register with the UNHCR since 2015 according to the Lebanese government's requirement.
2. Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination between the Lebanese Republic and the Syrian Arab Republic, available at http://www.syrleeb.org/SD08/msf/1507751474_.pdf [accessed 28 October 2020].
3. UNHCR, Resettlement Data Finder, available at <https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#Oa9c> [accessed 28 October 2020].
4. In this section, when we talk about humanitarian aid, we refer to food and cash-based assistance. When discussing UNHCR related assistance, Syrian interviewees primarily focused on monthly food assistance, followed by monthly cash assistance and winter assistance, and less on medical assistance, because this was already very limited. Iraqi refugees mentioned irregular assistance they received from UNHCR.
5. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 14 August 2019, Bar Elias.
6. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 1 August 2019, Hamra.
7. Interview with an Iraqi refugee, 10 August 2019, Nabatiyeh.
8. Ibid.
9. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 14 August 2019, Bar Elias.
10. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 7 August 2019, Beirut.
11. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 14 August 2019, Bar Elias.
12. Interviewee with a Syrian refugee, 24 September 2019, Tripoli.
13. Interview with an Iraqi refugee, 10. August 2019, Nabatiyeh.
14. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 24 September 2020, Tripoli.
15. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 4 August 2019, Ghazze, Beqaa.
16. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 14 August 2019, Bar Elias.
17. Interview with a Syrian refugee, 21 August 2019, Beirut.

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