

*Afkar: The Undergraduate Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 66-70.

**A Tool of the State: An Analysis of Migration Diplomacy and the Commodification of Refugees in Transit States**

DAVIDE L. R. DONALD, Johns Hopkins University

**Abstract:**

In the field of migration research there is a lack of focus on the potential strategic use of migratory flows in the foreign policy of transit states. Transit states are the nations that migrants and refugees pass through on their journey to seek refuge and economic opportunity, and they occupy an essential role in the global governance of migratory flows. There currently exists a phenomenon called the Grand Compromise between the Global North and the Global South in which transit countries are funded by wealthy states to retain and restrict migrants. The compromise provides transit states with an opportunity to utilize the flows of migrants through their borders in their international relations. Two frameworks can be used to understand how migratory flows are potentially used by transit states in their foreign policy: migration diplomacy and commodification of refugees. This paper will analyze the strategic use of refugees in various examples of transit states through these two theoretical frameworks.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Migrants, Foreign Policy, Transit States, Migration Diplomacy

The relationship between a country's refugee intake and its foreign policy has only recently begun to be researched. It may seem obvious that the quantity and kind of refugees that a country takes in will have an impact on its relations with neighboring countries and the international community. Yet, the discourse on refugee policy often ignores the political value of refugees and instead focuses on their economic and cultural impact on the host country. This gap in research has led to a lack of understanding of the potential that a country's refugee intake has on its diplomatic leverage over other countries. It must be clarified that the term "political value" of refugees has the potential of being interpreted as dehumanizing; yet, it is only being used because it is the simplest way to convey that a country's demographics, including its refugee population, are bound to have a particular impact on its political capital towards other nations. The following sections present an analysis of the literature on how refugees have been used as leverage by the Global South, and specifically transit countries, in their relations with the Global North. The paper will conclude with both an analysis on the potential strategic value of refugees through the lens of migration diplomacy, and an extensive critique of it, using the theory of commodification of refugees. This will serve to provide two perspectives on the utilization of refugees by transit countries, which are becoming an increasingly essential element of the global management of migration flows.

### **A Tool of Leverage Between Global North and Global South**

In an increasingly globalized world, there is a growing consensus amongst migration scholars that there exists an informal global migration management system between the Global North and the Global South.<sup>1</sup> This system has been named "The Grand Compromise," in which states of

the Global South host the majority of the world's refugees and states in the Global North finance refugee-hosting abroad.<sup>2</sup> The main driving force behind the establishment of this compromise is the maintenance of the sovereignty of wealthy states in the Global North. Sovereignty is studied by academics largely through the lens of how, and to what extent, states can control their borders.<sup>3</sup> Wealthy states have set up the system in such a way that they can maintain control over their borders and establish a more selective migration system. In the meantime, states in the Global South are often closer to the areas of conflict, instability, or of the greatest lack of opportunity, and are thus more susceptible to large waves of refugees. A large and sudden increase in refugee arrivals can take a heavy toll on a state's infrastructure, especially on the healthcare, education, and security sectors.<sup>4</sup> Even though there is extensive research on the potential positive economic impact of refugees in the long run, it would require significant efforts and resources to be initially provided by the state in order to integrate and promote refugees, which is more than what most large states in the Global South can successfully provide. An example of a state from the Global South that is often cited in research about the Grand Compromise is Jordan. In 2016, Jordan took the role of hosting large quantities of refugees from Syria and attempting to integrate them into the community in exchange for increased funding from the EU. Jordan was able to attain at the London conference an increase in billions of dollars of funding from EU states that wanted to deter Syrian refugees from reaching their borders.<sup>5</sup> The Jordanian example is seemingly very symbiotic, as Jordan was able to receive funding and improve its relations with the West, and the EU was able to excuse its refusal of Syrian refugees to the international community. Yet, this relationship merits further analysis. In the following sections the concept of a transit

country will be defined, and the frameworks of migration diplomacy and the commodification of refugees will be used to provide two differing perspectives on how to interpret a transit country's strategic use of refugees in its foreign policy.

### **Role of Transit Countries**

There exists a large body of research that analyzes the role of transit countries in the global migration management system. Transit countries are defined as those which migrants pass through on the journey from their home country to their final desired destination. There are a few theories as to why the transit migration has become a far more prevalent topic of research in recent years. An article from the European University Institute outlines the common conception that, due to globalization and developing technologies, migration across long distances is becoming much easier. This is occurring at the same time as the increase in restrictions placed by the majority of destination countries, and, as a result, migrants remain stuck in neighboring countries.<sup>6</sup> There are certain immediate negative effects that have been observed across transit countries during periods of increased arrivals of migrants. For example, transit countries experience economic hardships, as unemployment rates increase. Tensions are also likely to arise between the newcomers and the residents, and security challenges have the potential to develop, as human smuggling networks grow.<sup>7</sup>

There is far less research on the potential benefit that increased migration can pose for the transit country. For example, it has yet to be extensively analyzed whether transit migrants can replace native emigrants in the labor market. This would be an important area of research, as many transit countries, such as Turkey, are also major sources of labor emigration.<sup>8</sup> In one example of a study on the political use of migration

flows by a transit country, Ahmet Icduygu analyzed the case of Turkey. The country played a major role as a transit country during the Cold War, as dissidents from the Soviet Union passed through it on their way to Western Europe. The first non-Europeans that were allowed to take refuge in Turkey were anti-Khomeini dissidents from Iran following the revolution of 1979, even before they received recognition as refugees under the Geneva Convention of 1951.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that while Turkey did sign the convention, it maintained its geographic limitations and thus its obligations were only towards European refugees. Out of the roughly one million Iranians that passed through Turkey, it is estimated that two hundred thousand remained in the country.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Turkey took in such large quantities of refugees, even when it was not obligated to do so by the Geneva Convention, allowed the country to improve its image as a leader of the region and highlight its traditional identity as one of the major transit countries of the world. Turkey's use of its role as a transit country for its foreign policy objectives can be seen also in the initial generosity and openness that Turkey showed towards Syrian refugees - a tactic used by the state to support the Syrian opposition movement.<sup>11</sup> It can be seen as a strategic move because, at the same time, refugees of non-Syrian origin faced significantly harsher conditions and lacked support from the Turkish government.<sup>12</sup> This disparity in treatment stems from the lack of utility non-Syrian refugees had for the Turkish government in that period of time, compared to those that came from the Syrian opposition. Turkey's case exemplifies the extremely important role that transit countries play in the global migrant management system and highlights the need for greater research on this topic. The following sections will analyze how two different frameworks can be applied to a

transit country's strategic use of its refugee hosting capabilities.

### **Migration Diplomacy**

The framework of migration diplomacy allows for a greater understanding of the political value that migrants, and specifically refugees, offer to transit countries such as Turkey and Jordan. Migration diplomacy is defined as both the strategic use of migration flows to obtain certain aims, and the use of diplomacy to achieve goals related to migration.<sup>13</sup> The most common example of migration diplomacy in recent years has been the EU-Turkey deal of 2016. In 2015 international media agencies began to focus more on the migrant deaths at sea in the Mediterranean because of the worsening refugee crisis and the discovery of Alan Kurdi's body on the Turkish shore on 2 September 2015. The popularization of the photo of the dead child brought attention to the extreme danger that refugees, particularly of Syrian descent, were putting themselves in to cross the Mediterranean and the total disregard for their lives by the European Union. Turkey was able to utilize this period of increased scrutiny against the EU to pressure it into signing the deal and accelerating the country's membership application process.<sup>14</sup> The Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, acknowledged that his country had the power to threaten the longevity of the Schengen Area by simply opening its borders and allowing refugees to cross into Europe.<sup>15</sup> Some academics, as they researched the EU-Turkey deal, described it as a failure of the Grand Compromise, because Turkey's asylum system has basically collapsed.<sup>16</sup> But this would be a misunderstanding of the Compromise in the first place. Through the lens of migration diplomacy, it can be shown that Turkey's strategic use of its migratory flows to obtain the goals of greater funding and an accelerated membership process fits perfectly well in the Grand Compromise. The

EU can have a more selective process of immigration, while Turkey carries most of the burden of refugee hosting. The functionality of the refugee processing system has never been a goal of the Grand Compromise and thus, from the perspective of migration diplomacy, its collapse is secondary to the ability of Turkey and the EU to achieve their foreign policy goals.

Another case study that has been researched through the framework of migration diplomacy which sheds more light on how it can be used to analyze the strategic use of refugees by transit states is Jordan. Jordan managed to achieve the title of a safe haven for refugees in its region. The country has been able to skillfully use its refugee hosting capacity to obtain large amounts of funding and recognition at the global stage. Academics that focus on migration diplomacy have begun to study how Jordan's large refugee population has played a significant role in maintaining the country's ability to hold extremely high rates of labor emigration to the Gulf states<sup>17</sup>. The dichotomy of the country's ability to receive large amounts of refugees and maintain its economy largely through remittances by exporting high-skilled labor have fueled the country's economy and political influence. In Jordan's case, from a perspective of migration diplomacy, the country is able to strategically use its migratory flows to sustain its high rates of labor emigration and gain leverage over nations in the Global North. This diplomacy effort allows it to function within the Grand Compromise. Yet, more research needs to be done on the extent to which refugees can be used to substitute temporary gaps in the labor market and whether this would have a sustainable positive impact on both the country and the refugees themselves in the long run.

The migration diplomacy framework allowed for an analysis of Turkey and Jordan's strategic use of their refugee hosting

capabilities to capitalize from the Grand Compromise. Another framework, the commodification of refugees, has been recently formed that analyzes this migrant management system in the context of capitalism and offers a slightly contradicting thought process to migration diplomacy.

### **Commodification of Refugees**

Commodification of refugees is another, more critical framework which can be used to better understand the Grand Compromise and the role of transit states is the commodification of refugees. In order to explain the term, it would be useful to look at two case studies, Jordan and Lebanon. There exists a group of academics that oppose the framework of migration diplomacy and that argue that certain countries, many of which are in the Middle East, exploit their refugees by turning them into a commodity, meaning they are assigned a market value which can then be traded between countries. An example that is often used by academics in this field is the formation of the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) by the World Bank, the UN, and the Islamic Development Bank to provide concessional loans to Jordan and Lebanon to aid their refugee hosting capacities.<sup>18</sup> This allowed for a phenomenon of refugee rent seeking, in which states welcome refugees for the sole purpose of receiving funding from aid organizations.<sup>19</sup> The issue with this commodification is that it attracts states with pre-existing economic instability to welcome unsustainable amounts of refugees, while allowing the Global North to forego any responsibility that it has to host refugees. The main academic that has conducted research on this phenomenon is Gerasimos Tsourapas, who has developed the idea of the refugee rentier state. The Jordan Compacts of 2016 serve as a great example to showcase the rentier state theory, as the treaty saw the refugee population as a commodity that had a

specific monetary value that could be paid off by states in the Global North.<sup>20</sup> This analysis of the Jordanian case does not necessarily contradict a migration diplomacy perspective, but it does showcase the necessity for another framework that provides a more critical lens on how to analyze the use of refugees in the Grand Compromise.

Another example that shows how the migration diplomacy and commodification of refugees frameworks can be reconciled is Libya's treatment of refugees under Gheddafi. From a perspective of migration diplomacy, Libya strategically used its role as a transit country to gain influence on the African continent and gain leverage over the EU. By doing so, Libya was able to maintain and capitalize from its role in the Grand Compromise. From a perspective of the commodification of refugees, Libya was able to exploit its refugee populations and attach a specific market value to them, which the EU could then simply purchase,<sup>21</sup> essentially turning Libya into a refugee rentier state.

These two differing perspectives are not necessarily in opposition to each other, but an academic with Tsourapas's point of view would argue that both are necessary to achieve a full analysis of a state's strategic use of its refugee population.

### **Conclusion**

The international community has been able to form an informal management system of refugees in which states of the Global North fund those in the Global South to host refugees. In recent years, the major players in the system have risen to be transit countries such as Libya, Mexico, Indonesia, and especially Turkey. In analyzing the literature of how transit countries in the Middle East have strategically used their role to capitalize from the Grand Compromise, two main frameworks arise, migration diplomacy and the commodification of

refugees. The idea of migration diplomacy allows for an analysis of transit states, in which they strategically use their migratory flows to obtain certain foreign policy objectives that allow them to capitalize from their refugee hosting capabilities. The idea of the commodification of refugees provides a different perspective, in which transit countries exploit their refugee populations by turning them into a commodity that can be traded with the Global North. These concepts provide different, but not necessarily opposing, frameworks that can be used to understand the strategic use of refugees by transit countries. Based on the review of the existing literature there is a need for greater research to be conducted on the foreign

policy potential that refugees can provide for states, specifically as a tool for the Global South to gain power over the Global North. The existing frameworks can be used to guide future research with the ultimate goal of understanding what is the most effective way for the states which are forced to host large quantities of refugees to pressure wealthier states into providing greater assistance. This must be done while avoiding turning refugee populations into commodities to be traded at the international stage and by minimizing the negative impact on host countries, so as to work towards a system in which refugees are efficiently and humanely processed through the international migration systems.

<sup>1</sup> Arar, Rawan. "The New Grand Compromise: How Syrian Refugees Changed the Stakes in the Global Refugee Assistance Regime". *Middle East Law and Governance Journal*. 2017. Pg.298.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg.300.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg.301.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg.309.

<sup>6</sup> Fargues, Philippe. Bensaad, Ali. "Senders turned into receivers: Transit Migration in the Middle East and North Africa". *European University Institute. Mediterranean Program. 8th Mediterranean Research Meeting. 25 March 2007. Pg.2.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg.4.

<sup>9</sup> Icduygu, Ahmet. "The Politics of International Migratory Regimes: Transit Migration Flows in Turkey". *International Social Science Journal*. Vol. 52, Issue 165. 16 December 2022. Pg.360.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, Pg. 360.

<sup>11</sup> Aras, Gokalp Ela. Mencutek, Zeynep Sahin. "The international migration and foreign policy nexus: the case of Syrian refugee crisis and Turkey". *Migration Letters*. Vol. 12, No. 3. September 2015. Pg.203.

<sup>12</sup> Tunaboylu, Sevda. Alpes, Jill. "The EU-Turkey deal: what happens to people who return to Turkey?". *Forced Migration Review. Refugees Studies Center, University of Oxford. February 2017. Pg.10-11.*

<sup>13</sup> Tsourapas, Gerasimos. Adamson, Fiona B.

"Migration Diplomacy in World Politics". *International Studies Perspectives*. Vol. 20, Issue 2. 19 December 2018. Pg. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Okay, Asli. Zaragoza-Cristiani, Jonathan. "The Leverage of the Gatekeeper: Power and Interdependence in the Migration Nexus between the EU and Turkey". *The International Spectator. Italian Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 51, Issue 4. 24 October 2016. Pg. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Tsourapas, Gerasimos. Adamson, Fiona B.

"Migration Diplomacy in World Politics". *International Studies Perspectives*. Vol. 20, Issue 2. 19 December 2018. Pg. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Heck, Gerda. Hess, Sabine. "Tracing the Effects of the EU-Turkey Deal-The Momentum of the Multi-layered Turkish Border Regime". *Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies*. Vol. 3. February 2017. Pg.51.

<sup>17</sup> Chatelard, Geraldine. "Jordan: A Refugee Haven". *Migration Policy Institute Online Journal. Migration Policy Institute. 2 September 2010. Pg.5.*

<sup>18</sup> Freier, Luisa F. Micinski, Nicholas R. Tsourapas, Gerasimos. "Refugee commodification: the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking in the Global South". *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 42, Issue 11. 13 August 2021. Pg.2757.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>20</sup> Tsourapas, Gerasimos. "Researching Syrian refugees in Jordan and the rise of refugee rentierism". *Council for British Research in The Levant. British International Research Institute. 20 November 2019. Pg.1.*

<sup>21</sup> Tsourapas, Gerasimos. "Migration diplomacy in the Global South: cooperation, coercion and issue linkage in Gaddafi's Libya". *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 38, Issue 10. 28 July 2018. Pg. 2377.