Investigating Refugee Agency Amidst Widespread Popular, Political and Economic Discrimination and Alienation

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Refugees of the now 11-year-long Syrian Civil War who fled to Jordan to escape that conflict today face a tortuously difficult dilemma: many Jordanian citizens increasingly perceive members of these groups as unwelcome interlopers who compete for limited resources and employment, rather than as innocents placed in peril by a conflict they did not create. Reflecting its population's growing concern, the government of Jordan has proved more unyielding in its policy stance that refugees must be prevented from competing with native citizens for positions and resources, leaving those individuals in a parlous economic state, with most of them unable officially to work. As it happens, that policy does not apply to migrant farmworkers, employment that many in Jordan do not otherwise wish to pursue. Accordingly, the Kingdom has been relatively open to allowing fleeing Syrians to work in such roles in agriculture. This fact was important to our study as we wished to interact with deeply vulnerable refugees, and our chosen population, migrant farmworkers, certainly met that criterion.

Meanwhile, and more broadly, many of the world's democratic nations, including the United States, Australia, France, Germany, and Great Britain, remain mired in a divisive nativist and nationalist politics of alterity that has exploited the fears and ignorance of a share those countries' populations for electoral gain, with those states now less likely vigorously to support international agreements concerning the human rights and protected status of refugees. This fact has produced a difficult political environment for those calling on those governments to respect the moral standing and human rights of those displaced by the Syrian conflict.

This scenario raised at least two abiding concerns for us, and we treat each briefly in this chapter. First, how do especially vulnerable Syrian refugees view their capacity to exercise their political agency in this circumstance, and secondly, what specific elements of the political and social environment now confronting them must change and how to allow either their repatriation or their permanent resettlement in Jordan or other nations? We explore these twin concerns by means of an analysis of personal semi-structured interviews with a sample of poor migrant laborer refugees in Jordan. We situate and interpret our interviews within Benhabib's and Arendt's conception of agency and analysis of how nationalism and 'othering' may limit the scope for its exercise. Overall, we were interested in exploring and describing the understanding of self-perceived political agency possessed by a group of particularly vulnerable Syrian Civil War refugees now residing in Jordan.

Situating Refugee Agency and this Study

The literature on refugees has burgeoned in recent years, as social turmoil and civil or international conflict has

engulfed several nations, including Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, and the countries of the so-called Northern Triangle – Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador – in Central America. The brutal reality of social conflict has caused mass exodus from those countries and placed enormous stress on the United Nations (UN) and state institutions to respond. A backlash to this tide of humanity seeking refuge has arisen in many affected European nations, in Australia and in the United States, and a share of those countries' leaders have sought to stigmatize, scapegoat, and discriminate against members of these groups.

Jordan saw little of this sort of response until 2019–2020, when otherwise broadly sympathetic attitudes among some key government officials and many in the general public began to harden (The New Arab 2021). However, the Kingdom has accepted approximately 1.3 million Syrian refugees in recent years, a number that has deeply challenged the country's already thin social and economic capacity to respond and that is more than double the official total of those formally registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Roughly 80 per cent of this population lives in accommodations outside of UNHCR operated refugee camps and many agricultural workers, including those with whom we spoke, have received government-issued work permits allowing them to pursue employment. In this context, we thought it timely to examine how a particularly vulnerable subset of an already fragile population is now imagining its lived circumstances and prospects for moving forward in the harsh circumstances they confront.

Several authors have taken up this concern in refugee studies, although few more thoughtfully than Benhabib, who has searchingly developed ideas pressed by Arendt and others (Arendt 1979; Benhabib 2011, 2018). As political agency, our focus, is elemental to all democratic social change and certainly to that possibility in refugee lives, we employed Benhabib's conception of that construct to probe how our sample of individuals imagined their life prospects in such terms.

We interviewed a relatively small group of individuals (16, comprised of eight men and eight women) during a time in which their rights and agency were very much under threat to determine how they viewed their circumstances in such terms. We reckoned that those perceptions would be critical to their capacity to pursue and/or to cooperate with efforts to secure change in the status quo. We hoped our empirical inquiry would deepen our understanding of this critical valence in refugee studies and policy and politics in a mass migration scenario that has severely tested not only individual nations, but also the existing international refugee regime.

Benhabib has defined political agency as an expression of the communicative freedom of human beings (Benhabib 2018, 108). She has grounded her conception in Arendt's contention that individuals possess 'a right to have rights' because of the dignity that inheres in their humanity (Arendt 1979, 296–297). That norm and condition exceeds any specific national claim of rights, but also recognizes the paradox that such a possibility may yield unexpected results that constrain freedom, even as it may also enlarge the frame for the expression of such possibilities. In this sense, Arendt cautioned against the reality of freedom as an 'abyss under our feet' mediated by human will (Benhabib 2018, 107). As Benhabib has argued, the politics of human community in these terms may yield 'unexpected and contingent dimensions of the political' (Benhabib 2018, 107). One may not assume a simple linear causality that since innately humans possess rights and agency, it follows that when they exercise those perquisites the result will always protect or enlarge that freedom and agency. As Benhabib has noted in an analysis of Gündogu (2015) and Balibar's (2014) conception of Arendt's view on the premises of rights:

Arendt, following Montesquieu, understands principle as animating spirit. What then is the principle that animates the call for a right to have rights?

… The context transcendent norms presupposed by speech acts raise validity claims [in which] the equality of speech partners and their equal freedom to say 'yes' or 'nay'—is counterfactually presupposed. Insofar as political authority is rationally justifiable and is not just based on force, coercion, violence, and deceit, we enact *equaliberty* counterfactually every time we address one another and seek to give reciprocal acceptable justifications (Benhabib 2018, 108).

This argument suggests in turn that:

The principle of *equaliberty* animating the right to have rights [to possess and exercise agency] draws its force precisely from the fact that philosophy cannot deny *the other* the right to seek grounds as to why he or she is excluded from being recognized as a rights-bearing person. There are no such good reasons that would deny any human being the right to be an addressee of a validity claim that must eventually be addressed with reasons (Benhabib 2018, 109, emphasis in the original).

Importantly, this conception both provides the terrain, or metaphoric space, for human agency while also recognizing the difficulty of assuring the possibility for its exercise within the realities and vagaries of human disposition, nation-state sovereignty, and territoriality. In this sense, refugees face the ever-present possibility of witnessing an enervation of their right to have rights, 'of becoming *worldless*' and thereby seeing a share of their agency evanesce precisely because, as Benhabib has contended, following Arendt, 'they have no demonstrable, institutional, and interactional framework within which what they say and do can be recognized and responded to by others' (Benhabib 2018, 110). The refugees confronting this scenario do not lose their capacity for thought and opinion, but they may de facto exercise those faculties less and less meaningfully in the circumstances they confront.

Nonetheless, it is likewise clear that the right to have rights in this conception is contingent on all those engaged in dialogic interaction possessing that possibility, as its denial by one actor innately denies its possession to another. There is an in-principle paradox here, to be sure: Actions aimed at enervating the agency of others simultaneously degrade the rights of their purveyors, whether that fact is recognized by those discriminating against others or not. It is still the case, however, that such actions, especially when undertaken by a nominal majority, may damage or even hobble the capacities of those targeted and thereby limit their scope to imagine life's possibilities or to grasp the potential reach of their right to have rights. We were interested in exploring this dynamic among the refugees with whom we spoke.

Research Design and Methods

The lead author for this study has long maintained ties with a nongovernmental organization in Ma'an, Jordan, the Ma'an Orphanage Charitable Society, which has, in recent years, sought to provide support and succor to the various populations of refugees resident in its service area. For the past decade or so, that group has included migrant agricultural workers (farmers) who fled Syria to avoid persecution or death as that nation's civil war unfolded. Karaki worked with the Director of the Ma'an Orphanage Charitable Society to identify possible interviewees for this inquiry and to inform those individuals of the study team's interest in speaking with them to discuss their experiences as itinerant workers. Working together, the pair successfully approached a grower in the region who employs a substantial refugee workforce and gained his cooperation to allow the researchers to contact those in his employ to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Our sample arose from that contact.

We obtained Institutional Review Board approval for our study from Virginia Tech and Al-Hussein Bin Talal University and provided a recruitment flyer to Orphanage staff and the grower to share with potential interviewees. The study team also provided all individuals indicating possible interest in participation a consent form in Arabic. We imagined that each would sign the form and so it happened, but half of our interviewees did so only with an 'X' because they were illiterate, a fact that we had not previously predicted. Those individuals signed the form suggesting that they understood the character and risks and benefits of our effort after those were described to them orally before their interviews. We assured each participant that we would work to protect the confidentiality of their responses by assigning each a pseudonym and we have done so here by identifying individuals only with a number.

Karaki and Abbadi, of our study team, conducted the interviews in Arabic at the farm at which our interlocutors were working on 1 and 2 October 2019. This occurred at the request of the landowner/grower who, while willing to allow each individual time to participate in an interview, was unwilling also to have them take that time away from crop harvesting to travel to Ma'an for the purpose and return. Doing so would have likely meant each would miss a half-day of work and that was unacceptable to the farmer. Our team's Jordanian scholars served in this interviewing role, too, because of the fluency of each in the local language and the onset of travel difficulties from the United States linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, for Stephenson. The team also believed that the interviews might go more smoothly, and our interviewees prove more willing to share their views and perceptions, in the absence of an obvious

foreigner (Stephenson). While not initially planned, we are persuaded that was indeed the case in retrospect.

We devised 11 semi-structured questions with which to approach our 16 interviewees (please see Appendix 1) and estimated that each conversation would take perhaps 60 minutes. As it happened, however, our respondents had little knowledge to share concerning many of our concerns and communicated that fact openly and concisely. Our interviewees offered by far their most detailed and complex responses to our initial question concerning how they came to take refuge in Jordan and to become employed in their current migratory/itinerant farmer role. Most of our interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes with the shortest completed in 22 minutes. We say more about this below.

The team had hoped to record our interview sessions and transcribe them verbatim, but as Karaki conferred with Orphanage Society officials and the grower, it became clear that our potential respondents were uncomfortable with that approach. For each, it was, and reasonably in our view, a matter of trust. Our interviewees were living in a foreign nation under difficult conditions, and they were concerned not to say something that might redound to harm themselves or their families, despite our aim to protect their confidentiality. Most also had good reason not to trust authority, given their experience under the autocratic and abusive Assad regime in their home nation. Accordingly, we shifted course and Karaki conducted each interview, with Abbadi taking as close to literal notes of each response as feasible. Abbadi is a professional linguist and she recorded contemporaneous notes for each response and interview in Arabic. Once assembled, she translated each completed conversation into English so that all members of the team could consider and code individuals' responses and review the interviews as a group as well.

We did not expect, nor conclude, that the findings from this study would be generalizable in a statistical sense, but we are and were hopeful that our arguments, rooted in thoughtful theorization, may help illuminate the character of the continuing challenges confronting refugees in an international context organized on the principle of state sovereignty and animated by the relentless capacity for othering exhibited by human populations across the globe. In this sense, we hope our findings may be analytically generalizable.

Team members independently coded – conducted a content/thematic analysis – the interview transcripts as our principal source of data and we thereafter discussed our conclusions amongst ourselves. We outline the principal themes/findings, on which we agreed, without debate, coincidentally, below. Table 1 provides an overview of some of the most salient characteristics of our interviewees. In brief, as a group they were relatively young, averaging 39 years of age, were supporting relatively large families comprised of an average of seven members, were as likely to be illiterate as literate (50/50 chance, assuming that those not reporting on the matter explicitly were, in fact, literate) and knew almost nothing about their nominal human rights as refugees. Five respondents suggested they knew 'a little' about their rights, principally the requirements to obtain a permit to work as an agricultural laborer in the Kingdom. While most of our interviewees were supporting nuclear families, a share, one-third or six, reported that they were residing with/helping to support, extended family members as well.

Themes Across the Interviews

As noted, the research team each parsed the interviews to identify central themes that crossed them. Together, the group agreed on the following key findings:

- Every interviewee provided a narrative of trauma in which conflict and murderous strife had forced them to flee their homes in Syria. All had to leave their communities and small farm holdings behind and many reported that they had lost siblings and relatives in the war and/or were themselves being pursued by militias when they fled.
- Our interviewees were uniformly poor, and they had also been poor in their home nation as well. In that respect, their material condition had not changed markedly, although their relative physical security had surely improved.
- Our respondents suggested that their poverty had dictated their choice to seek refuge in Jordan. The Kingdom was geographically close to their homes in Syria and its population was like their own culturally and linguistically as well. What is more, our interviewees argued that they saw Jordanians as generally

welcoming and open to their presence, even as compared to life in UNHCR refugee camps, in which several of our interviewees had resided for a time following their exodus from Syria.

- A super majority, or three-fourths (12), of our interviewees indicated they would like to return to Syria when the situation permits and assuming they could again inhabit their original land and homes safely. Those conditions have not become broadly available to date.
- All our respondents indicated that they interacted little with Jordanians, other than their employers, due to the isolating conditions of their positions as migrant laborers. A quarter of our interviewees (4) noted that they obtained such information as they received on the security, political, and economic situation in the Kingdom and in Syria via radio and other itinerant harvesters.
- All but two of our respondents stated directly that they knew nothing about their human rights as refugees or about UNHCR efforts to track and assist them. Indeed, in so far as we could determine, none were receiving United Nations support of any kind, in part apparently, because they are not registered with the refugee agency. In any case, it would be difficult for that UN entity to track them since they spend roughly five months in Ma'an and seven months in Ghor harvesting crops each year and their interaction with groups and individuals beyond the farms on which they work is severely limited.
- Our interviewees lived in open-air tents on the farm on which they were working. Those living and laboring in these conditions were exposed to whatever weather occurred and utterly dependent on the good will of the grower employing them to supply them with sufficient potable water and wages to survive, which were far less than auspicious, especially for young children and older adults.

A Note on Literacy Levels in our Sample

We were especially struck that so many of our respondents volunteered that they were illiterate, as we did not include a question on the topic. As we noted above, we assume, but do not know with certainty, that those who did not indicate they were illiterate were in fact able to read and write. As a nation, Syria's overall adult literacy rate according to UNESCO in 2021 was 80.84 per cent, with 87.6 per cent of males and 73.63 per cent of females able to read and write (Countryeconomy.com 2022). Meanwhile, the similar statistic for Jordan in 2018 was 98.2 per cent overall, with males and females nearly equally likely to be literate (Statista 2022). Therefore, even acknowledging Syria's literacy rates and, assuming those who did not indicate their literacy status in our sample were literate, our interviewee group must be considered especially vulnerable in such terms.

While in Benhabib and Arendt's conception, agency does not depend on capacity to obtain and process information, it does seem likely nonetheless to be important in individuals' ability to understand their rights and position and this would appear to be especially significant for refugees working as itinerants in another nation. We suspect that those we interviewed know so little about their rights and context because so many of them are illiterate and all of them are also so isolated. These factors, while not per se impairing their capacity for agential action, make it difficult for them as individuals and as a group to exercise it. Or, if they do, illiteracy makes it materially more difficult for them to do so in anything like a probative way. While their living conditions are surely innately precarious, we believe this fact alone, illiteracy, significantly heightens this group's vulnerability to social predation and frailty.

Implications of our Findings

Perhaps the most striking finding of this modest empirical study is how little the affected refugees (our interviewees) knew about their rights, despite the precarity of their positions. Indeed, paradoxically, that very fragility may have contributed to their lack of knowledge concerning their situations. That is, their long working hours, marked social and geographic isolation, and itinerancy doubtless contributed to their ignorance of their rights.

Moreover, as we noted above, the high level of illiteracy in the group only aggravated these tendencies and made them still more difficult to address, let alone, to overcome. Indeed, an inability to mobilize and process information clearly exacerbated the isolation of the group and thereby deepened its innate vulnerability to the claims and actions of actors over whom they possessed no control and yet on whom they implicitly utterly depended. These included Jordanian government officials on whom their employment and resident status depended; citizens of the Kingdom whose decision to welcome or scapegoat them was critical to their capacity to survive; international actors with an

interest in the Syrian crisis, especially the European Union and its member states whose aid to Jordan has been material to its capacity to respond to the influx due to the war in Syria; the United Nations, especially UNHCR, which nominally protects refugee rights under international law, but which has not been materially important to this group; and finally, the landowners for whom these individuals worked, on whose good will and honest behavior their daily lives literally depended.

Indeed, in Benhabib and Arendt's terms, what is noticeable about the situation these refugees confront each day is the precariousness of their claims on others for right action. Fully half were illiterate, all were extremely poor, all are living isolated lives permitted, at least in legal terms, only so long as the state in which they reside allows them to ply their tenuous work. More, they are largely invisible to the United Nations and the nongovernmental organization advocating on their behalf can only do so within the frame permitted by the nation and prevailing public attitudes.

This analysis suggests that these individuals run the very real risk of being deprived, in Benhabib's terms, of the space that affords them a 'demonstrable, institutional, and interactional framework within which what they say and do can be recognized and responded to by others' (2018, 110). In their isolation and in being 'acted upon' by a host of agents other than themselves, they become vulnerable to ceasing to be 'the source of recognized validity claims,' which can only be parsed with respect to a shared public framework in the world. Their capacities for responsibility and agency are increasingly diminished in this web of circumstances. In a sense, our interviewees exemplify Arendt's prescient warning that those who are stateless in a world organized around state and nation foremost are persistently in jeopardy of losing their place in anything like what we might describe as a public sphere. That is, given the communicative nature of freedom and agency itself, they are in constant peril of 'losing their place in the world' (Benhabib 2018, 110).

While those we interviewed obviously have not lost their capacity for action or for formulating their own views, those capabilities were nonetheless sharply circumscribed in practice and were especially tenuous and dependent on the right actions and good will among many actors who had no special rationale or incentive to guard them apart from a normative claim in the abstract that our interviewees themselves could not articulate.

Taken as a whole, our sample of individuals mark each day in a scenario of continuing and prevailing precarity. This is not to say that our interviewees have lost or can lose their agency, but it is to remark that its exercise is hedged about in just the ways captured above by the beliefs, norms, and behaviors of actors far beyond the ken of our respondents even to imagine, let alone to act to seek to control. Our interlocutors pass each day in a sort of netherworld in which their grasp on the public sphere, always tenuous, can be made still more feeble, by actions taken by actors of whom they are utterly unaware.

Searching for an analogy for this reality, we are reminded of the English novelist Charles Dickens's fascination concerning the implications for individual lives of choices taken elsewhere or on the spur of the moment by actors whose 'rights' to such grave implications may be few or none, but whose choices, nonetheless, may set an individual's life course in specific directions (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2011, 270–281). We think of our interviewees in just such terms. Their agency is intact to be sure, but their wherewithal to act in the world, in the public sphere as highlighted above, is ever at issue and ever subject to enervation. As Arendt put this paradox when considering the origins and possibility of human rights when considering the experience of the Holocaust, 'the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself. It is by no means certain whether this is possible' (Arendt 1979, 296–297).

Conclusions

We offer four principal conclusions and a caution. First, our sample of refugees was extremely isolated socially and geographically. While nominally advantaged in terms of employment because they could get work in their chosen occupation when many refugees could not, albeit on whatever terms made available to them, compared to a share of their peers who cannot work, at least legally, they knew very little about their situations and rights. That fact, coupled with their isolation, and for many, their illiteracy, made it extremely difficult for members of this group to exercise their agency in any meaningful way.

Secondly, as a group and as individuals, accordingly, events happen to these individuals or life befalls them. Put differently, it is difficult for us to contend that their active engagement in the public sphere was in any way securing or shifting the boundaries of the lives they were prosecuting.

Third, their relative powerlessness, predicated foremost on their enervated agency, had bred for many the sense of anomie and dissociation from the broader world that portended Arendt's warning of a slipping away from the public sphere and into a condition of worldlessness. We were struck that only others, as least as our interviewees reported their life conditions to us, could wrest them from that positionality. In our view, that represents a very parlous condition indeed, given Arendt's appropriate remark concerning the potential abyss that is the exercise of human freedom. Fourth, we find ourselves wondering if a more active UN presence for this group might mitigate some of the harsher edged factors now shaping their agential possibility. Yet even as we might hope that UNHCR might find ways and means to support and educate this group more strongly, especially its adults, we wonder whether state sovereignty as well as its progeny, the fact that governments can and do provide whatever resources and remit they wish to that body, will ever permit it so strong a rights-oriented presence. Finally, one caution: Our encounter with this very exposed group has reminded us of the severe limits and fragility of the international human rights regime. However, one believes that enterprise is sustained, it seems clear that hatred and alterity are its sworn enemies, and these are both ever healthy in humanity and at something of an apogee worldwide as we write.

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