

Refugees and their preferences for relocation*

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June 13, 2021

Abstract

Despite popular portrayals, most refugees are highly immobile once they have left their countries of origin. They are subject to the decisions of various governance actors, which affects their individual agency, sometimes trapping them in a state of involuntary immobility in host countries. This has a bearing on their preferences for relocation to a third country. We argue refugees' preferences for relocation are a function of their perception of the effectiveness of governance actors in managing refugee situations. UN agencies often take on traditional public responsibilities for refugee populations, such as providing healthcare and education. Host governments' responsibilities, in contrast, are commonly limited to respecting non-refoulement and providing security. Based on these competencies, we can distinguish between refugee perceptions of institutions as bestowing purely or impurely 'agency-enhancing' benefits. We expect these different perceptions affect refugees' well-being in the host state, their perceived ability and aspiration to move onward, and their preferences regarding options outside legal frameworks. We test our expectations with an original survey among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon. We find purely agency-enhancing benefits are associated with a lower aspiration, but a higher perceived ability for onward movement. By contrast, impurely agency-enhancing benefits are associated with higher aspiration and a lower perceived ability for onward movement. Using a conjoint experiment, we also find that more positive perceptions of institutions are associated with a lower willingness to consider onward movement outside legal frameworks.

*This is the first public presentation of this paper, so all feedback is very warmly received. The research reported here was funded in part by award W911-NF-17-1-0030 from the Department of Defense and U.S. Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory under the Minerva Research Initiative. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Department of Defense or the Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory.

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1 Introduction

Approximately 85% of the world’s refugees and asylum-seekers are hosted in severely impacted first-asylum (i.e., “host”) countries, including locations such as Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda, and Lebanon. Even though hosts sometimes invest considerable resources, refugees are still commonly subject to substandard living conditions and severe regulatory restrictions on their ability to make a living for themselves and their families (Alrababa’h et al. 2020). While refugees commonly aspire to return home some day, they often do not wish to do so in the short-to-medium term for fear of persecution, conscription into the army, or placing themselves and their family in danger while conflicts remain ongoing. It is no surprise, therefore, that some refugees aspire to relocate to a third country, often in the Global North. Relocation¹ – like much else in a refugee’s life – is greatly affected by the decisions of states and international organizations.

Upon reaching the first-asylum country, refugees are subject to the decisions of agents of the host state (e.g., immigration officers, border guards, soldiers) and/or external humanitarian actors (e.g., personnel from the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]). These agents are collectively tasked with managing refugee situations. UN agencies tend to function as “surrogate states” (Slaughter and Crisp 2009), taking on traditional public service responsibilities such as providing healthcare and education. Host governments traditionally limit themselves to respecting norms of non-refoulement and providing basic levels of security to refugee communities (Kagan 2012). This clear division of responsibilities – where host states in the Global South are responsible for security, and humanitarian agencies, backed by the Global North are responsible for material assistance – emerged as part of a “grand compromise” in refugee policy (Cuéllar 2005). The developed states of the North accept relatively small numbers of refugees, with most refugees

¹We refer in this paper to “relocation” to cover the movement of refugees from their initial host countries to a third country, i.e., not their country of origin. Later, we will discuss “resettlement,” which is the term typically applied to the formal process of relocation of refugees by the UNHCR. Accordingly, we prefer to refer to relocation as a more general concept that captures both formal (resettlement) and informal processes.

remaining in the South. In return, according to [Slaughter and Crisp \(2009\)](#) host governments in the Global South suggested “that they would only admit and refrain from refoulement of refugees if the needs of such populations were fully met by the international community” (p. 4). Because hosted refugees do not enjoy political and economic rights equivalent to those of citizen populations, they depend a great deal on the goods, services and rights – what we refer to collectively as benefits – that governance actors provide. As of yet, little attention has been paid to refugees’ complex attitudes toward this web of governance actors, despite their significance to refugees’ everyday decisions and their plans for the future.²

We argue that, in a context of immobility, the effectiveness with which governance actors are seen to perform their duties will greatly affect refugees’ preferences for and decisions regarding whether to stay or relocate. The types of benefits provided by governance actors vary in the extent to which they enhance aspects of refugees’ agency. Refugees may perceive certain benefits provided to be *purely agency-enhancing* if they facilitate core livelihood goals. However, some benefits may be perceived as *impurely agency-enhancing*. These benefits facilitate core livelihood goals, but do so at the risk of suppressing the pursuit of other goals. The provision of security or protection is one of the clearest examples: Security officials protect individuals from harm by limiting (other) individuals’ actions. For refugees, effective security provision can also look a lot like oppression or the limitation of their mobility, even if it provides a satisfactory level of basic protection.

While greater agency may manifest in a greater ability to leave, it will also make living in the first asylum country more tolerable for refugees, thereby lowering their aspiration to leave. To understand migrant agency in a context where real movement is difficult to come by, we draw on Carling’s (2002) aspiration/ability model. According to this ‘two-step’ model, individuals’ desire and capacity to migrate are distinct concepts that may travel in different directions. While some individuals may be content where they live and others able to move if they are not, a sizeable and

²For a noteworthy exception, see [Carlson et al. 2018](#).

often invisible population is trapped in a state of “involuntary immobility.” The aspiration/ability framework captures a full spectrum of feelings about mobility which, observationally, may encompass the decision to stay as well as the decision to leave.

Using an original survey (N=1,750) among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon, we find that the effective provision of purely agency-enhancing benefits is associated with a lower aspiration, but a higher perceived ability for onward movement, reflecting a higher state of social and economic well-being. The effective provision of impurely agency-enhancing benefits, on the other hand, is associated with a higher aspiration to relocate and a lower ability to do so, indicating a greater sense of involuntary immobility. Moreover, the effectiveness of governance actors does not only affect feelings about mobility or immobility; it also shapes opinions on the potential course of action. When individuals do not have confidence in or perceive governance actors to be effective, they may regain agency through legal non-compliance (Levi 2006). We find evidence for this using a conjoint experiment.

Overall, our findings suggest refugees’ preferences for relocation are differentially affected by government and UN actors. This has important policy implications. The ‘grand compromise’ of refugee policy follows the existing incentives of states. States’ primary instinct is to prioritize and defend sovereignty (Krasner 1999), over extending rights to refugees or migrants (Weiner 1996). The UNHCR and the international community, in respecting sovereignty, have restricted their mandate to providing material assistance, while refugee security is considered the exclusive domain of the host state (Cuéllar 2005; Mcnamara 1998). As a result, benefits that could enhance the well-being of refugees – such as unrestricted access to the labor market, for example – tend to fall through the cracks (Kagan 2012). Our results show that refugees’ well-being and their preferences about the future can be traced back to the ‘grand compromise’ that states have struck.

Our study contributes to the migration literature, which has overwhelmingly focused on decisions to flee countries of origin, by developing a distinct theory of subsequent, onward movement to a third country. This is particularly important in the case of refugees, where a lack of

political and economic rights and an extraordinary dependence on political institutions in the first-asylum country, may inhibit full integration (Ghosn et al. 2021) and force consideration of onward movement. It is, therefore, likely that decisions regarding initial displacement to the host country and the subsequent journey to a third country require somewhat different theoretical frameworks. We also address the long-standing “mobility bias” in migration literature (Schewel 2020; Braithwaite et al. 2020). Though desires for onward movement often remain unfulfilled – and we do not observe them – they nevertheless have consequences for refugee communities, and need to be taken seriously by international actors (Carling and Schewel 2018). More generally, we advance political science literature by examining the role of governance actors beyond the confines of the nation state. Standard treatments are interested in how citizens perceive their own governments. Refugee movement is unique in that successful refugee hosting requires refugees rely on a variety of political players from different nations over whom they hold no real political power.

2 Refugees and relocation

Mobility is an age-old adaptation to crises (Affi et al. 2016; Shah 2020). Growing numbers of people globally are forced to become mobile as they adapt to worsening threats to their livelihoods associated with climate change (Cattaneo et al. 2019), natural disasters (Drabo and Mbaye 2015), and protracted armed conflicts (Davenport et al. 2003). Crises resulting from armed conflicts alone affect as many as one quarter of the world’s population. More than two-thirds of the 33 armed conflicts in the international system as of the end of 2019 had been ongoing for longer than 10 years. This increasingly protracted nature of conflict and the fact that more and more of these conflicts are fought between higher numbers and more complex networks of militant actors means the deleterious effects of conflict are felt by more people and for longer than in previous decades (Mia 2020). This has inevitable consequences for the options available to affected populations trying to manage these effects.

There are more than 80 million individuals worldwide currently classified as having been forcibly displaced. Two-thirds of these people were displaced from their homes and forced to move elsewhere within their home country, where they remain as internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Mooney 2005; Moore and Shellman 2006). The final third, or approximately 26 million individuals, fled their homes and crossed international borders in search of safety and opportunity — consequently acquiring refugee status in new host countries (Davenport et al. 2003; Moore and Shellman 2007).

An impressive architecture of laws, protections, obligations, and responsibilities were articulated and pieced together in the wake of the Second World War to provide support for populations affected by conflicts and persecution when making decisions in pursuit of safety. The original 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines as refugees those individuals who, ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.’

When the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted and when its 1967 Protocols were agreed, refugees were expected to pass into neighboring countries to find safehaven from hardship in their countries of origin, before then requesting formal resettlement in a third country where they might seek more permanent asylum. This process of temporary refugee hosting and more permanent resettlement was traditionally managed by the UNHCR in consultation with host and resettlement countries and provided refugees with significant protections under international law (Hathaway 2005). From its contemporary inception at the ratification of the 1951 refugee convention, formal refugee resettlement has been viewed as a centerpiece, durable solution to protracted refugee situations, and one that would improve upon the poor performance of the international

community during World War II in accommodating refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

After 70 years, however, it is clear that the reality of the system no longer matches its original design and intent. Importantly, refugees' abilities to resettle no longer keep pace with their aspirations to do so (Carling 2002). Although there are a variety of studies demonstrating the positive economic, political, and social benefits of accepting refugees (Jacobsen 2002; Cortes 2004; Taylor et al. 2016; Salehyan 2018), the international refugee regime suffers from a lack of cooperation by states willing to accommodate the displaced. This is reflected in a general trend toward states refusing to classify refugees as a unique class of immigrants deserving of protection. Instead, refugees are perceived as entering illegally or abusing international asylum law (Orchard 2014). Since 2016, formal resettlement opportunities have become especially rare. Most states are limiting already small resettlement programs as part of broader restrictions on immigration policies. Perhaps most notably, the United States reduced the number of refugees they were willing to resettle. In 2016, the United States took in about 52% (96,900 out of 189,300) of refugees that were resettled globally, while in 2017 they took in only 27% of the shrinking number globally (28,000 out of 102,800). The UNHCR concluded that in 2018, just 55,692 of the 1.2 million refugees globally processed as eligible for resettlement were allowed to move to a third-country (UNHCR 2017).

This vanishing trend in resettlement means the overwhelming burden of refugee-hosting is carried by developing states (Ineli-Ciger 2019). These tend to be countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Kenya, that are neighboring civil conflict countries (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, respectively). There are numerous challenges faced by host and refugee populations in these contexts (Hynie 2018). Populist rhetoric scapegoats refugees as having the potential to destabilize host countries, fuelling public concerns regarding hosting refugees and other forced migrants (Dempster and Hargrave 2017). This rhetoric likely reinforces the relative neglect of this already vulnerable population, with refugees increasingly facing protracted stays in neighboring host coun-

tries that struggle to meet the economic and social costs of hosting.³ There is commonly also a scarcity of resources available to support the humanitarian needs of arriving refugees and/or to offset the cost to provision of social services to local populations. This generates dire conditions in refugee camps that threaten to undermine host security (Milton et al. 2013). As may also be the case rhetorically in developed countries (Dempster and Hargrave 2017), the resource burden faced in developing countries can mean that local populations struggle to accept refugee populations within their borders, especially given the large number of refugees in protracted scenarios (İçduygu 2015; Ghosn et al. 2019).

As a consequence, the vast majority of refugees are left effectively ‘involuntarily immobile’ by the combination of a dearth of options for safe passage to destination countries and difficult circumstances in their prolonged, “temporary” host countries (Lubkemann 2008; Schewel 2020). To be clear, this is the intention of the “grand compromise” of global refugee policy in which developed donor states funnel monetary assistance through UN agencies to help developing host governments keep refugees from imposing a burden on the more developed states (Cuéllar 2005). This arrangement fundamentally protects the status quo, including a defense of sovereignty (Krasner 1999), in which the regulation of mobility is prioritized over the granting of rights and opportunities to migrant and refugee populations (Weiner 1996). Asylum-seekers depend on the host state for permission to carry out routine activities and on international organizations, including the UNHCR for basic necessities that they would normally have provided for themselves (Cuéllar 2005; Mcnamara 1998). As a consequence, services and resources that could enhance the well-being of refugees, including consistent access to the labor market, tend to fall through the cracks

³It is important to note, though, that there is no consistent evidence of dangers associated with mobile refugees. While the movement of refugees has sometimes been shown to be associated with the subsequent emergence of violence (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Milton et al. 2013), evidence now tends to point towards refugees not being associated with elevated levels of violence along the routes of their transit or in the countries that host them (Zhou and Shaver 2019). Refugees tend to remain the most likely targets of violence (Onoma 2013; Böhmelt et al. 2019), rather than its perpetrators.

(Kagan 2012).

In other words, whereas by design, refugees were once expected to depend upon the UNHCR and destination countries for their mobility, they now find themselves dependent upon the UNHCR and their “temporary” host countries for their immobility. Media narratives highlight mobility – which is, by necessity, oftentimes informal. However, the frustrated aspirations that backdrop this movement are generally invisible to the rich countries that limit refugees’ formal resettlement.

3 Agency-enhancing benefits: The role of governance actors

According to Carling’s (2002) aspiration/ability model, individuals’ desire and capacity to migrate are distinct concepts that form part of a two-step decision. Aspiration to migrate is defined as “a conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration” and “can vary in degree and in the balance between choice and coercion” (Carling and Schewel 2018, p. 946). Ability relates to one’s capacity to overcome barriers or take advantage of opportunities. There is significant heterogeneity on this front: Characteristics such as one’s financial situation or family history, for example, will likely affect who is able to migrate. Additionally, ability is both real and perceived. Perceived ability is shaped by social context, as individuals learn from the experiences others (see, e.g., Simon et al. 2018). In Carling’s original formulation (2002), individuals can be categorized into three types: Those who do not wish to migrate, those who wish to migrate and are able to, and those who wish to migrate and are unable to – the ‘involuntarily immobile.’ The latter category is the most concerning and describes many refugees living in severely impacted first-asylum countries: Individuals who are unhappy where they are, but are unable to move to what they perceive to be a better place.

Refugees’ aspiration and ability to relocate will be influenced by the governance actors

managing refugee situations. In the first-asylum country, we may distinguish two sets of governance actors with presence on the ground: the host state and external humanitarian actors, led by UN agencies. Jointly, these governance actors shape the ‘context of reception’ that “[organizes] the life chances of newcomers” (Portes and Böröcz 1989, p. 618). Governance actors provide refugees with access to certain benefits, which we define simply as resources that are intended to enhance refugees’ well-being. Because they do not enjoy normal political and economic rights, refugees’ livelihoods depend on the benefits that these actors provide in order to regain a certain degree of agency. As we discuss below, while greater agency may manifest in a greater ability to leave, it will also make living in the first asylum country more tolerable for refugees, thereby lowering their aspiration to leave.⁴

The types of benefits provided vary in the extent to which they enhance aspects of refugees’ agency. Refugees may perceive certain benefits provided to be *purely agency-enhancing* if they simply facilitate their core livelihood goals, such as income stability or achieving certain human capital targets. Education, healthcare, legal documentation to move freely, and full access to the labor market could all be considered purely agency-enhancing if they simply ease existing hardships and constraints. However, some benefits provided to refugees may be *impurely agency-enhancing*. These benefits facilitate core livelihood goals, but do so in a limited sense, and at the risk of suppressing the pursuit of others. Examples of benefits that could be perceived as impurely agency-enhancing are aid given on some burdensome condition, or access to the labor market that is sector-specific or is not accompanied by a guarantee of basic rights. For example, if an individual takes advantage of a sector-specific right to work, they may be forced to abandon their profession. In reality, the purity of agency-enhancing benefits is likely to vary on a continuous scale. However, for analytical ease, we dichotomize them into pure and impure categories. It is worth noting

⁴Until we consider this question explicitly at the end of this section, we remain agnostic about whether refugees are considering relocating through legal channels or outside legal frameworks. Relocation decisions are complicated by the fact that refugees are unlikely to know, at a given point in time, whether legal resettlement is available to them. However, as we will show, our expectations on governance actors are the same regardless of the modality of relocation.

that purity is a characteristic of the benefit; it does not describe the performance of the actor who provides it. In other words, the ineffective provision of a purely agency-enhancing benefit does not render it impure; conversely, the effective provision of an impurely agency-enhancing benefit does not render it pure, as we illustrate below.

The provision of security or protection is perhaps one of the clearest examples of an impurely agency-enhancing benefit. The co-existence of agency enhancement and suppression are central to its core definition: Law enforcement protects individuals from harm by limiting (other) individuals' actions. For the less-privileged (such as refugees) effective security provision can also look a lot like oppression, even if it provides much-needed protection (Pratto et al. 2006). Research has shown that less-advantaged individuals in high-crime areas often perceive authorities to be arbitrary and overly punitive, while still trusting them in specific situations (e.g. Bell 2016; Armenta and Rosales 2019; Hagan et al. 2018; Carr et al. 2007). Armenta and Rosales (2019, p. 1350) find, for example, that, despite the fear of deportation, undocumented immigrants believe American police to be “both trustworthy and overly punitive.”

Effective security can be even more limiting in emergency situations, such as the one refugees experience for prolonged periods of time. Refugees are often the victims of violence and are likely to value protection from the state (Polo and Wucherpfennig 2021; Böhmelt et al. 2019). Surveys have shown that security is among refugees' top concerns (e.g. Alsharabati and Nammour 2017). However, security – valued as it may be – also places significant burdens on refugees' livelihood strategies. To protect refugees – and to protect citizens from refugees – security officials restrict and regulate refugee spaces and access to services through curfews and checkpoints (Fakhoury 2020). This limits refugees' ability to go about their daily lives, inhibiting their social and economic activity. Furthermore, refugees are often discriminated against by the agents tasked with their protection, resulting in their “criminalization and immobilization” (Sanyal 2018, see also, Fakhoury 2020; Nassar and Stel 2019; Janmyr 2016). As such, refugees are likely to have ambivalent attitudes about security provision – which in first-asylum scenarios is one of the few

services that the host state (exclusively) provides.

In most first-asylum scenarios, external and host actors follow a clear division of labor, providing distinct benefits to refugees. Benefits likely perceived to be either purely agency-enhancing or impurely agency-enhancing sort themselves relatively neatly into the distinct competencies of each set of actors (Kagan 2012). UN agencies often function like “surrogate states” (Slaughter and Crisp 2009), taking on many of the traditional responsibilities of the state. These include providing food, health, education, refugees’ registration and status determination, as well as managing refugee resettlement. In other words, external actors are more likely to be associated with purely agency-enhancing benefits. Host states’ responsibilities are narrow: They are in charge of providing security to refugee communities (Kagan 2012). Host states may also provide refugees with rights to access the labor market. However, in practice, only a select group of countries have a fully-functional national policy supporting unrestricted right to work (Asylum Access and Refugee Work Rights Coalition 2014). In Lebanon, for example, only 1,500 Syrians (out of a population of approximately one million) held work permits in 2018 (Uzelac and Meester 2018, p. 20). In reality, refugees are more likely to resort to informal networks to obtain a job rather than enjoying any rights afforded by the host state (Harb et al. 2019).

Because of this clear division of labor, refugees learn to expect different things from host states and external actors (Kagan 2012; Slaughter and Crisp 2009; Grabska 2008). Turner’s ethnographic work paints a clear image of this division of labor, as seen from within refugee camps in Tanzania: “Whereas the camp commandant [an agent of the host government] zealously controls who enters and who leaves the camp, guarding the perimeters of this island in Tanzanian territory, it is international relief agencies, led by UNHCR, that are in charge of the day-to-day ‘care and maintenance’ of the camp” (Turner 2009, p. 313). And further, in Turner (1999, p. 2): “It is the UNHCR – or merely the *wazungu* (white people) – that provide food, medicine and plastic sheeting for building blindés (huts).”

The effectiveness with which external actors provide purely agency-enhancing benefits

will have an important influence on refugees' general well-being in the host country. For refugees caught in a protracted state of immobility, agency can render their situation more tolerable. In other words, agency-enhancing benefits are likely to *lower* their aspiration to move onwards. This is not to say that humanitarian assistance in an impacted host country can substitute for the rights afforded to refugees in wealthy north European countries (Brekke and Brochmann 2015). However, if external actors like the UNHCR effectively provide benefits that enhance refugees' agency, staying in the host country (at least temporarily) becomes a less-unfavorable option. The UNHCR also manages resettlement. As such, a perception that the UNHCR is competent and acting in their best interests would increase refugees' perceived ability to relocate, regardless of whether their perception of effectiveness is well placed. Kvittingen et al. (2019), for example, cite the case of asylum-seekers who are still in refugee status determination and resettlement processes and, "since UNHCR files remain open until a solution is found, those recognized as refugees many years earlier still held onto the slim possibility of resettlement, believing their files were 'still being studied'" (p. 117). As such:

H1: Perceived effectiveness of external actors will be associated with a lower aspiration and a higher perceived ability to relocate.

Host country actors are chiefly responsible for benefits that refugees are likely to view as impurely agency-enhancing. The effective provision of these kinds of benefits is likely to have more nuanced effects. For example, law enforcement agents who are doing their job well will provide much-needed protection, which can decrease individuals' aspiration to relocate. However, these agents will also be effective in further 'immobilizing' refugees and suppressing their livelihood strategies (Sanyal 2018), which could increase individuals' aspiration to relocate. It is not the case that all impurely agency-enhancing benefits, in all contexts, will decrease individuals' perceived ability to relocate. However, as mentioned earlier, work allowance and security provision is likely to undermine or suppress – rather than simply enhance – agency in first-asylum states (Asylum Access and Refugee Work Rights Coalition 2014). As a result, refugees are likely to

face significant constraints in income generation and, therefore, a lower ability to meet the costs of onward movement.

The immobilization of refugees by the state can also extend to physically restricting their exit from the host country. For example, to leave Lebanon, Syrian refugees need to secure an exit visa. For many, an exit visa is impossible to attain because it would require regularizing their legal status and not having any unpaid residency bills. If attempting to leave Lebanon through an official border without an exit visa, refugees are likely to be stopped by Lebanese security and would have to either pay the unpaid fees or receive a re-entry ban (Janmyr 2016, p. 74). Host countries may lower refugees' ability to relocate simply by providing effective protection. The UNHCR is responsible for intervening – and possibly providing resettlement – if effective protection is not provided by the state (UNHCR 2011, p. 247). Viewed in a different way, if effective security is forthcoming, refugees are less likely to be considered for resettlement based on individual protection needs. All in all, we can most confidently hypothesize about the influence of effective host country actors on perceived ability to relocate, but remain agnostic about its influence on aspiration.

H2: Perceived effectiveness of host actors will be associated with a lower perceived ability to relocate.

Hypotheses *H1* and *H2* argue that the perceived effectiveness of governance actors in the first-asylum country can affect aspiration and ability to relocate. We have argued that effects will differ across host country and external actors. This is because external actors provide a higher quantity of unconstrained, purely agency-enhancing benefits, and host country actors provide a higher quantity of impurely agency-enhancing benefits. We will now argue that the perceived effectiveness of first-asylum actors will not only shape aspiration and ability to relocate; it will also affect refugees' attitudes on compliance with legal asylum arrangements.

International law places refugees and first-asylum governance actors within a relation-

ship of trust with mutual obligations. Refugees have a right to adequate reception and standard of living, and to a fair and efficient asylum process (UNHCR 2017 2011, p. 247). Refugees, on their part, “have duties and obligations to respect national laws and measures to maintain public order, including obligations to cooperate with the asylum process” (UNHCR 2017, par. 5). Individuals are more likely to comply with the asylum process (in other words, refrain from ‘moving on-wards’ informally) when governance actors are perceived to be legitimate (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).⁵ Ineffective service provision erodes the legitimacy of a governance actor (e.g., Scharpf 1999). Evidence from developing countries shows that deteriorating or inadequate institutional performance is linked to noncompliance with laws or regulations (Levi et al. 2009; Bernstein and Lü 2003; Fjeldstad and Semboja 2000; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). Carlson et al.’s (2018) study on refugees hosted in Greece suggests that an environment of low political trust – a key indicator of legitimacy (Hutchison and Johnson 2011) – may be associated with higher informality.

Compliance is also more likely when enforcement is perceived to be effective and credible. Levi (1988) coins the term ‘quasi-voluntary’ compliance to describe the situation in which citizens comply with laws out of a combination of strategic and normative considerations. Questions of legitimacy and trust may promote voluntary compliance, but individuals will also calculate the probability of being caught and punished if they do not comply. Checkpoints and borders, manned by host country security agents, can also deter noncompliance with a credible show of force. As such, while external actors may promote compliance through legitimacy, host country actors may promote compliance through quasi-voluntary compliance, or simply non-voluntary compliance, depending on the legitimacy they enjoy (Levi 1988). Since effectiveness is linked to voluntary, non-voluntary, or quasi-voluntary compliance – and both sets of first-asylum governance actors can promote one or more of these – we can hypothesize that:

H3: Effectiveness of first-asylum actors will be associated with lower willingness to

⁵We refer to the concept of empirical legitimacy, which is defined as “a sense of obligation and willingness to obey” (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).

relocate outside legal frameworks.

4 Research design and sample

We draw upon an original survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Syrian refugees are the largest single-country share of the global refugee population. Furthermore, Lebanon hosts the largest population of refugees globally (as a share of the total resident population of the country). We pursue two complementary modelling strategies. In Section 5, we use multivariate observational survey analysis to examine our theoretical expectations related to involuntary immobility (*H1* and *H2*). In Section 6, we analyze data from a conjoint experiment to examine our expectation on legality of onward movement (*H3*). Questions on legality may elicit social desirability bias. Various indirect questioning methods have been developed specifically for this purpose, including list experiments and endorsement experiments (e.g., [Blair et al. 2014](#)). Conjoint experiments also allow us to calculate preferences indirectly, however they do so within a multidimensional choice framework designed to mimic choices made in the real world ([Horiuchi et al. 2020](#); [Ben-Akiva et al. 2019](#)). Because relocation alternatives vary a great deal ([Brekke and Brochmann 2015](#)), some of alternatives may be worth investing in and some may not. It is, therefore, important to provide respondents with contextual reference points on which to base their decision. Please see Appendix A for a full account of ethical considerations such as minimizing risk to respondents and data security, and how we have addressed them.

We surveyed 1,750 Syrian refugees throughout Lebanon during June and July 2018. According to official UNHCR statistics, there are over 1,000,000 Syrians living in Lebanon, distributed throughout the country. About 70% of refugees live in residential buildings and 30% in unofficial settlements or camps. We aimed to ensure that the distribution of survey responses reflected the geographic distribution of the refugee population. First, we grouped the 8 governorates of Lebanon into four contiguous governorate-pairs (regions) and used the known distribution of

refugees in these regions to determine a proportionally representative survey distribution per region (See Table 1).

We further distributed the governorate-pair survey quota across the 24 districts of the Lebanon, so that the number of responses per district would be proportional to the size of the refugee population per district, as determined by the UNHCR in 2018. We then selected towns or settlements within each district with the probability of being selected proportional to the size of the refugee population in each town or settlement. Because all refugees must register with municipalities, we obtained a household listing of Syrian refugees for each town. Typically, Syrian refugee households were clustered within a town. We used systematic sampling to select households from this listing: The starting household in each town or settlement was randomly selected from the list until an adult respondent willing to participate was found (the enumerator team only selected one individual per household). The team then skipped three houses to go to the fifth house on the list to request their next respondent. We applied the same method in unofficial settlements: after the first tent was chosen, enumerators skipped the next three and chose the fifth tent.

Table 1: Distribution of Survey Sampling Population For Syrian Refugees by Governorate-Pair

	Refugee Population	Syrian Refugee Population	Sample
North Lebanon & Akkar	251299	25%	503
Beirut & Mount Lebanon	287651	27%	545
South Lebanon & Nabitieh	117750	12%	232
Bekaa & Baalbek-Hermel	360733	36%	720
Total	1017433	100%	2000

5 Involuntary immobility and relocation

For our first analyses, we look at responses to two questions about relocation. The first question concerns refugees aspirations to relocate to a third country. It asks respondents on a scale of 1-7, ranging from ‘dislike a great deal’ to ‘like a great deal’: “Whether or not you think you are ABLE to do so, how much would you like to move on to another country (not including Syria)?” The

second question concerns their ability to relocate. It asks respondents on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from ‘extremely difficult’ to ‘extremely easy’: “How easy do you think it will be for you to move on to another country (not including Syria)?”

To test hypotheses H1 and H2, respectively, we include indicators on the perceived effectiveness of the UNHCR (*Effectiveness UNHCR*) and the host government (*Effectiveness LBN Gov.*) in dealing with issues affecting refugees. We also include a variable measuring confidence in the Lebanese justice system (*Conf. Justice System*). This is calculated from three questions asking if respondents were confident that crime would be dealt with if reported to the municipality authority, police and security forces, and the Lebanese army.⁶

We also include additional variables that may explain individual differences in respondents’ desire and ability to relocate. We include a series of variables related to host country conditions: Whether individuals are employed, whether they live in a camp, whether they have experienced any kind of verbal or physical abuse during their time in Lebanon, and their general perception of whether host country conditions are deteriorating. We also include a series of standard demographics: Their age, how long they have been living in Lebanon, their gender, their marital status, and whether they have members of their networks living in a third country (not Syria or Lebanon). We also control for their intention to return to Syria sometime in the future, which may affect their intention to relocate to a third country or stay in Lebanon. These variables and their descriptive statistics are detailed in Table 2.

Given the seven-point scale of our dependent variables, and for ease of interpretation, we use OLS. Our first analyses, shown in Table 3, test our expectations regarding the effect of perceived effectiveness on respondents’ aspiration and ability to relocate (H1 and H2). We present three OLS models for each of our two dependent variables: *Model 1* is our baseline model, pre-

⁶For this analysis, we measure confidence in all three agencies as a combined indicator, as there is significant overlap in responses: 98% of respondents either had no confidence in any of the three agencies or had confidence in all of them.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	N (non-missing)	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Aspiration to resettle	1,718	4.22	2.25	1	7
Ability to resettle	1,646	2.81	1.72	1	7
Effectiveness UNHCR	1,688	3.65	1.18	1	5
Effectiveness LBN. Gov	1,650	2.61	1.26	1	5
Conf. Justice System	1,638	0.43	0.49	0	1
Age	1,733	35.11	12.35	18	90
Displ. Duration (Yrs.)	1,746	4.73	1.74	0	8
Networks Abroad	1,751	0.06	0.24	0	1
Male	1,751	0.50	0.50	0	1
Married	1,746	0.88	0.32	0	1
Employed	1,746	0.19	0.40	0	1
Exp. Phys. Abuse, LBN	1,732	0.07	0.26	0	1
Exp. Verbal Abuse, LBN	1,736	0.29	0.45	0	1
Live in camp	1,750	0.30	0.46	0	1
Sit. Worse LBN	1,745	0.24	0.43	0	1
Would never return to SYR	1,748	4.34	2.08	1	7

senting our main independent variables of interest, *Effectiveness UNHCR* – our purely agency-enhancing actor – and *Effectiveness LBN Gov.* and *Conf. Justice System*, our impurely agency-enhancing actor; *Model 2* includes standard demographics and *Model 3* is our fully specified model, including our baseline variables, standard demographics, current living conditions, as well as attitudes toward general host country conditions and towards an eventual return to Syria.

We find robust results in support of Hypothesis *H1* and *H2* across all three model specifications. Belief that the UNHCR deals effectively with refugee issues is significantly associated with a lower aspiration but a higher ability to relocate. Belief in the effectiveness of the host government, on the other hand, is associated with a higher aspiration to relocate but a lower ability to do so. In general, we see the same divergent pattern for confidence in the justice system. Taken together, these results indicate that, while perceived competence of impurely agency-enhancing actors is associated with higher levels of *involuntary immobility*, the perceived competence of purely agency-enhancing actors is associated with higher levels of *voluntary immobility*. That voluntary immobility is associated with perceived effectiveness of purely agency-enhancing actors – even

Table 3: Aspiration and ability to relocate: Regression results

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>	
	Aspiration	Ability	Aspiration	Ability	Aspiration	Ability
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Effectiveness UNHCR	-0.32** (0.05)	0.38** (0.04)	-0.32** (0.05)	0.36** (0.04)	-0.27** (0.05)	0.26** (0.04)
Effectiveness LBN Gov.	0.58** (0.05)	-0.50** (0.04)	0.57** (0.05)	-0.49** (0.04)	0.49** (0.06)	-0.36** (0.04)
Conf. Justice System	0.27* (0.14)	-0.30** (0.11)	0.27 (0.14)	-0.31** (0.11)	0.33* (0.14)	-0.12 (0.11)
Age			-0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Displ. Duration (Yrs.)			0.10** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.10** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
Networks Abroad (=1)			0.78** (0.22)	0.11 (0.17)	0.75** (0.22)	0.16 (0.16)
Male			0.11 (0.11)	0.30** (0.08)	0.22 (0.11)	0.15 (0.08)
Married			-0.07 (0.16)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.12)
Employed (=1)					-0.27 (0.14)	0.08 (0.10)
Exp. Phys. Abuse, LBN (=1)					0.07 (0.22)	-0.18 (0.16)
Exp. Verbal Abuse, LBN (=1)					0.06 (0.13)	0.49** (0.10)
Living in camp (=1)					0.09 (0.14)	-0.34** (0.10)
Sit. Worse LBN					-0.07 (0.14)	-0.75** (0.10)
Would never return to SYR					0.11** (0.03)	-0.16** (0.02)
Observations	1477	1431	1457	1411	1427	1382
R ²	0.15	0.19	0.17	0.21	0.18	0.30
Adjusted R ²	0.14	0.19	0.16	0.20	0.16	0.29
Adjusted for sampling	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

after we account for variation in current host country conditions and attitudes about the future – is an important finding. It suggests that well-functioning institutions that enhance refugees’ agency may have an important and positive influence on refugees’ well-being in the host country. This is especially important as 4 out of 5 refugees tend to remain in host countries that are adjacent to their countries (UNHCR 2018).

Turning to our control variables, refugees perceive greater aspirations to relocate if they have been displaced for longer, if they have networks abroad, if they are male, and if they do not wish to return to Syria. Those who perceived the situation in Lebanon to be deteriorating perceived a lower ability to relocate. This is to be expected: The host country’s economic and institutional environment is likely to affect refugees’ economic prospects and ability to meet the costs of onward movement. It is worth noting, however, that whether or not an individual is employed does not appear to have a significant effect on preferences for relocation. In Lebanon, refugee employment is often infrequent and informal; refugees often rotate in and out of precarious jobs (Harb et al. 2019). As such, the general welfare of the host country may be a more stable indicator of future economic prospects than whether one is currently employed. Interestingly, whether an individual has suffered physical or verbal abuse in Lebanon does not have significant effects aspirations to relocate. However, we do see a strong and positive relationship between individuals’ experiences with verbal abuse and their perceived ability to relocate. Verbal abuse in the country of refuge may be an indicator of a threat to an individual’s physical safety or fundamental human rights, which may qualify an individual for resettlement based on ‘individual protection needs’ – though resettlement is commonly pursued only if protection by the host state cannot be re-established (UNHCR 2011, p. 247-249).

6 Destination choice and legality: Conjoint analysis

To test our expectations about the effect of the perceived effectiveness of governance actors on respondents' willingness to travel outside the auspices of the formal refugee resettlement program (*H3*), we designed a choice-based conjoint experiment that was embedded in the larger survey. Choice-based conjoint experiments ask respondents to evaluate and choose from different pairs of hypothetical profiles described by randomized levels of a set of attributes. Widely established in various disciplines and increasingly so in political science (Bansak et al. 2019), such experiments estimate the causal effect of each attribute level – or in our case, each characteristic of a destination alternative – on the probability of a profile being selected. As we mentioned earlier, an additional advantage of this approach is that rather than directly asking for attitudes, preferences are calculated indirectly from the profile selections and so social desirability bias should be minimized (Horiuchi et al. 2020).

We endeavoured to keep the task simple and short, not only due to the exigencies of the field, but also to minimize fatigue among over-researched respondents (Sukarieh and Tannock 2013; Ben-Nun 2011, see also Appendix A). Our conjoint experiment was randomly presented to approximately 25% of our sample (402 respondents), participants were presented with a hypothetical choice task scenario, where they are faced with two choices for resettlement from Lebanon to another country abroad (not including Syria). Participants were then asked for their preferred choice from two alternatives, though they could also respond with “do not know / no response” or by skipping the choice task. The two alternatives, generically labelled as “Country A” and “Country B”, were described by four attributes: the level of abuse that refugees might expect to experience in the country; the ease of finding work there; the diaspora present in that location; and the legality of relocation itself. The level for each attribute in each profile and choice task was randomly selected from three or four options as shown in Table 4. Each participant was presented with five such randomly generated choice tasks resulting in a total of 1,828 completed tasks (91% of all generated choice tasks).

Table 4: Attributes and Levels

Attributes	Levels
Level of abuse	No verbal or physical Some verbal Some physical and verbal Frequent physical and verbal
Ease of finding work	Easy Moderate Difficult
Size of diaspora Syrian diaspora	Syrian diaspora Only Middle Eastern diaspora No Middle Eastern or Syrian diaspora
Legality	Resettlement for you and your family Resettlement for you only No legal resettlement so would have to make your own way No legal resettlement so would have to use a smuggler

We estimate the marginal mean effects using the user-written *conjoint* command (Frith 2021) in Stata, following the statistical approach developed by Leeper et al. (2020). In simple terms, marginal means can be interpreted as the average probability that an alternative with a given attribute level is selected. Figure 1 displays the marginal means of our conjoint alternatives, calculated across our sample. Overall, the results show that refugees’ relocation choices are significantly influenced by the risk of encountering abuse at the destination, finding work, the presence and type of diaspora, and the legality of the move. In terms of the latter result, we find that refugees significantly prefer to resettle where its legal for themselves and their family and are significantly deterred from locations where its not legal and they have to make their own way. (The need to use smuggler aligns with this finding but falls short of reaching traditional levels of statistical significance.)

Figure 2 examines marginal means conditional on respondents’ perception of the UNHCR’s effectiveness in dealing with refugee issues, and on respondents’ attitude toward the host government: general perceived effectiveness of the Lebanese government and confidence in the Lebanese justice system.

Hypothesis 3 suggests that the effectiveness of the refugee governance system will be

Figure 1: Marginal mean estimates of preferences for relocation destinations

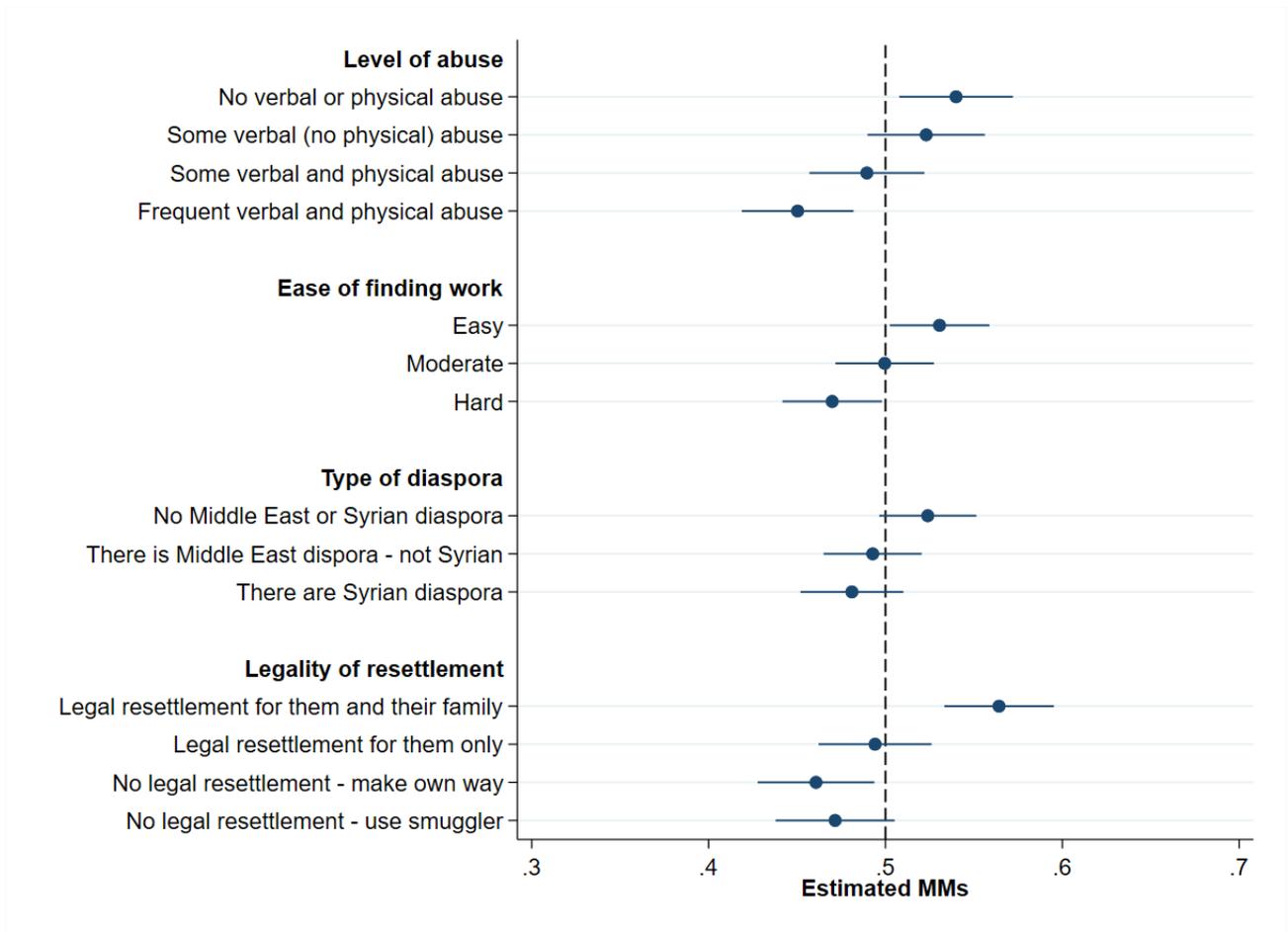
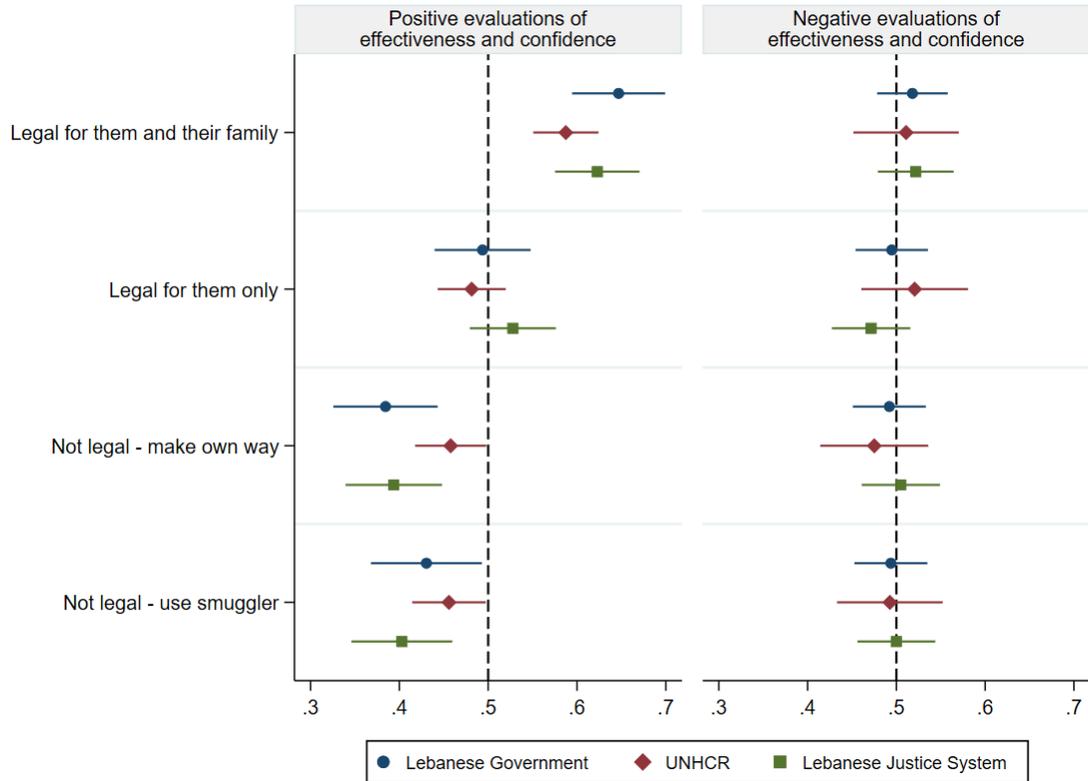


Figure 2: Marginal mean estimates: Legality



associated with a lower willingness to move outside legal frameworks. Because refugees enter relationships of trust with both the UNHCR and the host government, we expected that their views on either actor should affect willingness to comply with regulations. We find some support for our expectations. For all three actors, where perceived effectiveness or confidence in a governance actor is high, refugees significantly preferred locations – and selected them on average 60% to 65% of the time – where relocation is legal for themselves and their family. In contrast, those with negative views were not significantly more likely to select these destinations, or in fact, any particular destination based on the legality of relocating there. Discernment appears to be more marked when it comes to the Lebanese government.

7 Discussion

Despite popular portrayals, most refugees are highly immobile once they have left their countries of origin. Once they leave their countries of origin, the vast majority of the world's refugees are hosted in severely impacted developing economies, subject to substandard living conditions, and with severe regulatory restrictions on their ability to make a living for themselves and their families. While many refugees wish to return to their country of origin at some stage, the majority cannot do so because of fear of persecution, conscription into the army, or lethal danger from still ongoing conflicts. Thus, many feel trapped in a state of “involuntary immobility” (Carling 2002). It is not surprising, therefore, that refugees hosted in these situations would explore formal and informal opportunities for onward movement.

Because hosted refugees do not enjoy normal political and economic rights, they depend a great deal on the goods, services and rights – benefits – that governance actors provide. As of yet, little attention has been paid to refugees' complex attitudes toward this web of governance actors, despite their significance to refugees' everyday decisions and their plans for the future (however, see Carlson et al. 2018). In addressing this perceived gap in knowledge, we argue effectiveness with which governance actors are seen to perform their duties will greatly affect refugees' decisions on whether to stay or relocate. Specifically, we suggest preferences regarding onward movement are a function of refugees' perceptions of the effectiveness of political institutions and agencies in managing refugee situations.

We distinguish between refugee perceptions of institutions as providing purely or impurely ‘agency-enhancing’ benefits. Refugees may perceive certain benefits provided to be *purely agency-enhancing* if they facilitate core livelihood goals. However, some benefits may be perceived as *impurely agency-enhancing*. These benefits facilitate core livelihood goals, but do so at the risk of suppressing the pursuit of others. The provision of security or protection is one of the clearest examples: Security officials protect individuals from harm by limiting (other) individ-

uals' actions. For refugees, effective security provision can also look a lot like oppression, even if it provides a satisfactory level of protection. While greater agency may manifest in a greater ability to leave, it will also make living in the first asylum country more tolerable for refugees, thereby lowering their aspiration to leave. We expect these different perceptions affect refugees' well-being in the host state and their perceived ability and aspiration to move onward. Moreover, these perceptions also shape opinions on their potential future course of action. When individuals perceive state actors negatively, they may regain agency through legal non-compliance (Levi and Stoker 2000). Given limited resettlement opportunities, refugees' only realistic option for onward migration is often outside legal frameworks.

We test our expectations with an original survey (N=1,750) among Syrian refugees hosted in Lebanon. We find the effective provision of purely agency-enhancing benefits is associated with a lower aspiration, but a higher perceived ability for onward movement, reflecting a higher state of social and economic well-being. The effective provision of impurely agency-enhancing benefits, on the other hand, is associated with a higher aspiration to relocate and a lower ability to do so, indicating a greater sense of involuntary immobility. Moreover, the effectiveness of governance actors does not only affect feelings about mobility or immobility; it also shapes opinions on the potential course of action. When individuals do not perceive governance actors to be legitimate, they may regain agency through legal non-compliance (Levi 2006). We find evidence for this using a conjoint experiment.

These findings show how refugees' preferences for relocation appear to be differentially affected by government and UN actors. This reinforces the idea that the 'grand compromise' of refugee policy simply defends states' sovereign interests (Krasner 1999) ahead of the rights of refugees and migrants to be mobile (Weiner 1996). The UNHCR and the international community, in respecting sovereignty, have restricted their mandate to providing material assistance, while refugee security is considered the exclusive domain of the host state (Cuéllar 2005; Mcnamara 1998). In other words, our findings suggest it is necessary to more closely integrate the work being

done by UN bodies and host governments in order to improve refugees' feelings of agency and well-being.

Our study also contributes to the migration literature, which has overwhelmingly focused on decisions to flee countries of origin, by developing a distinct theory on subsequent moves. Onward movement takes place between two countries, neither of which is home. This is particularly salient in the case of refugees, where a lack of political and economic rights and, related, an extra-ordinary dependence on political institutions in the first-asylum country, may inhibit full integration ([Ghosn et al. 2021](#)). It is, therefore, likely that decisions regarding first and subsequent moves require somewhat different theoretical frameworks. We also address the long-standing “mobility bias” in this literature. We also advance the rich literature on political trust by extending it beyond the nation state. Refugee hosting is unique as it requires that refugees trust political players representing different nations, over whom they hold no real political power.

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Appendices: Refugees and their preferences for relocation*

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June 13, 2021

A Ethics

When conducting research with vulnerable populations, such as refugees, it is essential that ethical and moral measures are taken to protect not only the participants and researchers, but to also preserve the integrity of the study (see [Jacobsen and Landau 2003](#); [Wood 2006](#); [Palmer 2008](#); [Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018](#); [Masterson and Mourad 2019](#); [Ghosn et al. 2021](#)). In the sections below, we lay out the steps we took to address these issues by first discussing how we minimized the risk to our respondents and second, the measures we took to protect the data.

*This is the first public presentation of this paper, so all feedback is very warmly received. The research reported here was funded in part by award W911-NF-17-1-0030 from the Department of Defense and U.S. Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory under the Minerva Research Initiative. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Department of Defense or the Army Research Office/Army Research Laboratory.

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A.1 Minimizing Risk to Respondents

First and foremost, our approach was grounded in ensuring the safety of the participants ([The Belmont Report 1978](#); [Fujii 2012](#)). Forced migrants, especially refugees, face numerous economic, political and/or legal challenges that make them an extremely vulnerable population. As result, they need to trust that their responses will not only remain confidential but that they cannot be used against them. Our first step was to obtain ethics approval from the university's International Review Board (IRB). We then chose a survey firm in Lebanon (Miners for Study and Research) whose team members had Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Certificates as this guarantees that enumerators not only understand but are also recognize the importance of our informed consent process. In our consent process, we included information about the project, the co-PI leading the fieldwork, the means for participants to report concerns, as well as the risks and benefits. In order to be mindful of the participants circumstances, we limited our survey to 30 minutes. We also did not include any questions that are political sensitive in nature and just as importantly, avoided certain topics that we felt might either endanger the participant or the numerators. For example, we did not ask if the respondents if they had participated, politically or militarily, in any event in Syria prior to their arrival in Lebanon.

A.2 Data Security

Several measures were also taken to safeguard data quality, validity, and security. In addition to choosing a firm that had the proper training, they also utilized tablets that were programmed with the KOBO software. This allowed the research team to access the data in real time as each

tablet was equipped with the GPS software, therefore ensuring the quality of the data as the team would be able to identify any irregularities or deviations. However, all geographical identifiers were deleted before the data was shared with the research team and after it was downloaded by the team, the firm expunged it from records.

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