

New Book – Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States

Written by Max O. Stephenson Jr. and Yannis A. Stivachtis

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MAX O. STEPHENSON JR. AND YANNIS A. STIVACHTIS, APR 21 2023

This is an excerpt from *Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States*, edited by Max O. Stephenson Jr. & Yannis A. Stivachtis. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The large and continuing refugee stream that arose from the long-lived Syrian Civil War that began in 2011 has deeply affected the politics and demography of the countries of the eastern Mediterranean. This edited volume assesses the politics of that recent refugee crisis from the vantage point of those nations shaped by it or whose leaders have explicitly sought to ameliorate it or use it otherwise to mobilize support.

First, and overall, the book employs the Copenhagen School theoretical framework to analyze how Syrian refugees have been securitized and de-securitized by national governments as well as political and social groups operating in the eastern Mediterranean countries. Second, and relatedly, it explores whether and to what extent the nations of that region have sought to integrate Syrian refugees into their societies. To that end, its chapters examine the policies that receiving states have enacted and the actions that they have undertaken to address that challenge. A share of the contributors also analyze the roles that international actors, including the European Union (EU), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have played in the process of Syrian refugee integration in the east Mediterranean region.

To investigate these overarching concerns, the chapters address four basic questions for the nations or organizations they treat. First, how the still unfolding refugee crisis has affected the institution or country under examination; that is, what policies and processes were pursued, crafted or adopted to address the effects of the crisis and how government leaders and advocates framed, justified or rationalized those strategies. Second, how relevant governmental or institutional policy has evolved as the Syrian Civil War and its displacing effects have continued and why. Third, what the implications of evolving national or organizational choices have been for the security and humane treatment (conduct in accord with existing human rights conventions) of refugees. Finally, what broader significance the Syrian crisis appears to portend for policy and law governing refugees in the relevant states and institutions analyzed.

Taken together, this book's chapters suggest that several cross-cutting themes or phenomena have played vital, if varying, roles in east Mediterranean government and popular responses to the mass displacement and migration prompted by the Syrian Civil War. First, these essays highlight the problem of alterity or othering as a central feature of these nations' reactions to the Syrian mass migration challenge. Second, human tendencies to xenophobia and fear of difference and change have played a key role in producing broad popular ill-will and government opposition to assisting Syria's displaced. Finally, these currents merged in each of the countries under examination, although at varying speeds and to changing degrees during the decade of the Syrian migration, to generate calls by many individuals within them that migrants and refugees constituted a security threat to be met with demonization and removal and/or with efforts to ensure they were kept 'at bay' at all costs. The comprehensive security approach employed in this study helps analysts identify salient forces and concerns crucial to such public movements and, at least indirectly, can help government leaders marshal efforts to prevent or mitigate their exacerbation or recurrence.

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Book Structure

This book is divided into two parts and fourteen chapters. In Chapter 1, Max O. Stephenson Jr and Yannis A. Stivachtis focus on how refugees are securitized and what policies receiving states should enact and what actions they should undertake to integrate refugees into their national societies effectively.

In Chapter 2, Neda Moayerian and Max O. Stephenson Jr. analyze how Jordan and Lebanon, two major Syrian conflict refugee host countries, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have responded to the Syrian Civil War and the refugee exodus it spawned. More particularly, the authors trace the changing strategies that the UNHCR has adopted – and how it has responded to shifting social, political, and economic conditions and relevant public policies in Lebanon and Jordan during the Syrian conflict. They argue that since the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, the ensuing refugee crisis has required many nations and international and nongovernmental institutions to craft new policies and processes and implement existing ones on a large scale to address its impacts. According to Moayerian and Stephenson, this has been true not only in absolute terms, but also within specific nations across time. For example, as the conflict continued, with no solution in sight and host countries confronted an overwhelming demand for public services, even those with historically welcoming policies toward refugees reduced their support to Syrian refugees to decrease the costs on their infrastructures, economies, and citizenries.

In Chapter 3, Evanthia Balla observes that the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and the turmoil of the Arab Spring all led to growing instability in Europe's neighborhood, creating the most severe refugee crisis in the region since World War II. Balla points out that the EU and its member states are the leading donors of international aid to Syrians inside that country and across the region and that the humanitarian drama that the nation's civil war has produced is far from over. Her chapter explores and analyzes the EU's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. She presents an overview of the Syrian

refugee crisis, followed by an analysis of the European Union's response to that humanitarian and security calamity. She contends that internal malfunctions at the European level – in terms of policy and politics – have negatively affected the EU's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. She concludes that the crisis needs to be treated as an opportunity for further integration, rather than as an excuse by Union member states for further division and political deadlock.

Georgeta Pourchot offers an evaluation of the rise of civil society in the context of the 2011 Syrian civil conflict and the resulting refugee crisis in Chapter 4. Pourchot asks whether a civil society could function in Syria under conditions of government restrictions on freedom, and in the context of a civil uprising lasting more than a decade. She uses Western and Arabic concepts of civil society to identify whether the activities of specific Syrian groups amount to an emerging civil society. She argues that two types of civil group activities, advocacy and humanitarian relief, indicate that Syrians have indeed organized themselves outside of, and despite, government efforts to exert control, to provide support to people displaced by the conflict; a fact that demonstrates in her view that Syria is evidencing a nascent civil society.

Part II explores national responses to the Syrian refugee crisis.

In Chapter 5, Zeynep Mencutek and Ayat Nashwan draw on the conceptual debates concerning resilience to examine the Jordanian response to Syria's mass refugee migration. They focus on how Jordan's long-term refugee policy plans have adopted the vocabulary of resilience. Their document analysis demonstrates that the concept of resilience is widely used and now connotes several positive, but ambiguous, meanings. They suggest that national policy plans describe resilience as a pillar of refugee governance alongside humanitarian assistance, as a substitute for development objectives, as a characteristic of the system and a desired trait of refugees and host communities. Moreover, they argue that policymakers perceive resilience as a good value and aim in which to invest. According to Mencutek and Nashwan, resilience terminology potentially yields three benefits. First, it enables governments to claim ownership of refugee governance and to address the needs of affected host communities. Second, through perhaps overemphasizing resilience, Jordanian policymakers have appropriated a regional and global humanitarian policy shift towards a long-term self-reliance agenda. Third, the vocabulary has further legitimized development

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support by providing evidence that employed wording to which many donors often react favorably, including transparency, cost-effectiveness, crisis prevention, vulnerability assessment, and others. In these ways, they argue, resilience discourse may allow Jordanian government policymakers to build on their adoption of a moderate diplomatic tone concerning hosting refugees.

Sukaina Alzyoud, Fatima Alzyoud, and Dania Shahin describe the Lebanese government's response to the evolving Syrian refugee crisis in Chapter 6. They assess published reports, studies, and articles to chart the twists and turn of the Lebanese response and argue that the nation's government enacted policies to address health care, education, food security, housing, and employment. They contend that the economic and health care system elements assumed center stage in the government's efforts to manage the crisis. They conclude that the country's economy and health care system were hard hit by the crisis and that the government's response appeared to occur piecemeal rather than to be strategically planned. In contrast, they suggest, the governmental response appears to be based on the government's political agenda and availability of donor money.

Jameel Abu Muddather, Renad Abbadi Karaki, and Max Stephenson Jr. report in Chapter 7 on the results of an empirical study they conducted to explore the self-perception and awareness of human rights and agency of a sample of Syrian refugees employed as itinerant farmworkers near Ma'an in south-central Jordan, and in Ghor in that nation's Jordan River Valley. They found that those they interviewed were leading geographically and socially isolated lives and knew little about their rights and did not seek actively to express their agency. They situated their analysis of their interviewees' sense of agency within Arendt and Benhabib's conceptions of 'the right to have rights,' the paradoxical danger implicit in human freedom and the power of alterity as a motive force in human behavior.

Chapter 8 presents Dina Rashed's investigation of Egypt's policies toward the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011. Her analysis highlights the combination of challenges and opportunities facing Syrian refugees and their host communities in Egypt during that period. Rashed discusses the political context of the Syrian and Egyptian uprisings and how they have affected Syrians in the country. She argues that the Egyptian government's stance towards refugees has been shaped by considerations of domestic stability and economic capacity. She notes that like Syria, Egypt experienced mass protests in 2011 but the political paths of the two countries have since diverged significantly. She argues that while Egypt's political turmoil resulted in two mass protests and regime changes in 2011 and 2013, Syria has slipped into civil war with regional and international powers supporting the warring parties. Moreover, Rashed suggests that Egyptian leaders view potential violent spillover effects from neighboring conflicts as a serious security threat and that perception has shaped that government's policies regulating entry and treatment of Syrian refugees. She concludes that economically speaking, the Egyptian government has worked to restore macroeconomic stability and provide appropriate services to its citizens during the years she examined, yet the effects of following neoliberal international prescriptions as it has done so have affected living conditions for both citizens and Syrian refugees.

Yannis Stivachtis and Erica Martin examine the responses of the Israeli and Cypriot governments to the Syrian refugee crisis in Chapter 9. They focus on the nativist frameworks used to discriminate against asylum seekers in both nations. They argue that Israel and Cyprus have exhibited many similarities in their political and social responses to asylum seekers and refugees as both countries have mandated that these groups may only temporarily be granted asylum. In addition, each has created policies that make it difficult for them to gain access to the social services they need to survive. In both states, Stivachtis and Martin claim, asylum seekers and refugees have been 'othered' by local right-wing political actors to protect the identity of the dominant ethnic group. Those groups have employed negative terminology including, 'infiltrators' and 'barbarians,' alongside mass media sources to dehumanize and delegitimize these already marginalized individuals. Moreover, right-wing groups have blamed asylum seekers and refugees for social problems, such as rising crime rates and economic hiccups for which they are not responsible. Finally, asylees and refugees have been targeted and 'otherized' in the context of Israel's historical conflict with Palestine and Cyprus's long-standing conflict with Turkey in which, in fact, they have no role. As such, they have also been racialized, discriminated against, and cut off from civil society. As a result, neither state has engaged in any meaningful efforts at refugee integration. Instead, each has maintained their practice of ethnocentrism and nativism through exclusionary frameworks to protect what their leaders perceive to be cultural security in Israel and cultural and economic security in Cyprus.

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In Chapter 10, Dimitris Tsarouhas discusses Turkey's critical role in the migration and refugee crisis that affected the EU in 2015–16. His main argument is that Turkey has sought to cope with the crisis in two distinct identifiable phases. According to Tsarouhas, during the first, which spanned roughly 2010 to 2015, Turkey sought to reap political benefits from the Syrian crisis. The nation did so by welcoming millions of Syrians and seeking to manage the situation by upgrading its domestic infrastructure to do so with the support of external actors, including especially, the European Union. Turkish government leaders believed that Assad's regime would soon collapse, placing Ankara in a prime position to influence Syria's future. For Tsarouhas, the fact that this expectation did not materialize weighed heavily in subsequent developments. In the second period, post-2015, and as the crisis became endemic, Turkey's government confronted a threat and an opportunity. On the one hand, Turkey's ability to manage the crisis declined, as the number of Syrians residing in the country remained very high and opposition parties began offering an effective political narrative that blamed the government for harboring large numbers of 'interlopers'. Finally, and as a result, during this second period, Tsarouhas argues, Turkey's government began losing control of the discourse regarding Syrian migrants and refugees, a fact that contributed to its electoral defeat in the 2019 municipal elections.

In Chapter 11, Alexandra Prodromidou and Faye Ververidou examine the evolution of the Greek legal framework of integration policy and analyze that nation's policy implementation gaps in its application. They note that the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement shifted Greece's role gradually from a transit country to a destination nation. In turn, that fact prompted a rise in the importance of integration policies in Greece. They point out that despite this change, strong securitization tendencies in policy formation, both at the EU and the national levels, resulted in the prioritisation of deterrence of irregular migration and border security over integration.

In Chapter 12, Augusta Nannerini shows that there has not been a single or unified Italian response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Instead, she outlines three different ways refugees, including those fleeing the Syrian Civil War, have recently been received in Italy. To do so, she frames her analysis by referring to the dangerous routes by which Syrian refugees can reach the country, paying particular attention to the Central Mediterranean Route. Next, she discusses the safe pathways to reach Italy put in place by the Ministry of the Interior with its resettlement program and the initiative of the Humanitarian Corridors led by faith-based organizations and civil society groups. She argues that the refugees who arrive in Italy by these means constitute a category dubbed 'administrative arrivals,' which entails special rules and procedures to apply for asylum and to be part of programs to foster social integration. She suggests that the difference between the categories and related treatments of the 'spontaneous arrivals' and the 'administrative arrivals' demonstrates that *how* Syrian refugees arrive in Italy has played a critical role in determining the different responses they have confronted.

In Chapter 13, Yannis Stivachtis and Emma Casey focus on the treatment of Syrian refugees in Libya and Malta. They argue that the Syrian refugee flow has put great strain on the resources and institutions of the two countries, which have found themselves pressed hard in their efforts to address the crisis. Stivachtis and Casey point out that both countries' governments have faced pressures from internal and external sources, which have fostered an environment in which it has been difficult for policymakers to address the refugee issue coherently. They also note that the two nations have both permitted, and failed to address, the inhumane conditions and treatment of refugees at their detention centers. In Libya, they suggest, detention centers have become a hotspot for corruption, human trafficking, torture, and forced labor while Malta's detention centers have been criticized for their improper screening processes and inadequate living conditions. They also argue that the decentralized nature of Libyan society and complexity of power relationships make any reform extremely difficult. Malta's government, meanwhile, has confronted the reality of the country's small size, limited resources, and its population's broad disdain for migrants. Malta's migration challenges have been exacerbated by the lack of a coherent EU policy, which has encouraged the nation's policymakers in their decision to adopt an aggressive anti-migrant posture.

Finally, Stephenson and Stivachtis sketch the main themes of the book, and their implications, in Chapter 14.

About the author:

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Max O. Stephenson, Jr. serves as a Professor of Public and International Affairs and the Director of the Institute for Policy and Governance at Virginia Tech (VTIPG). His research and teaching interests include human rights and refugees; civil society and democratic theory, especially as pertaining to conceptions of political agency and social change processes; NGOs and international development; and peacebuilding. He is the author or editor of 11 books and more than 80 refereed articles and book chapters. He has taught graduate and undergraduate courses related to community change and development both domestically and internationally for nearly three decades. Stephenson has also led the VTIPG Community Change Collaborative (CCC), an interdisciplinary graduate student group with academic and professional interests in community change dynamics and praxis in the United States and abroad, for more than a decade. His commentaries concerning American and international politics and democracy can be accessed at the following links: (1) and (2).

Yannis A. Stivachtis is Professor of Political Science and holder of the Jean Monnet Chair at Virginia Tech. He also serves as Director of the Center for European Union, Transatlantic & Trans-European Space Studies (CEUTTSS) – A Jean Monnet Center of Excellence; Director of the International Studies Program; and University Coordinator of the Diplomacy Lab. His research and teaching interests include International Relations theory (English School), security/strategic studies, and European Studies. He is currently the editor of the Critical European Studies book series (Routledge) and co-editor of the Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies (AJMS). His most recent books include: *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies* (Routledge, 2021; co-editor); *Regional Security in the Middle East: Sectors, Variables and Issues* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2019; co-editor); *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2018; editor); *The State/Society Relationship in Security Analysis* (U.S. Army War College Press, 2015). *Revisiting the Idea of the European Union as Empire* (Routledge, 2015; co-editor); *Europe after Enlargement* (Routledge, 2014; co-editor); *The European Union and Peace-building* (special issue, *Review of European Studies*, 5(3), 2013; co-editor); *EUrope and the World* (special issue, *Review of European Studies*, 4(3), 2012; editor); *Human and State (In)Security in a Globalized World*, 2nd edition (Kendall Hunt, 2011); and *The Economic Dimension of Turkey's Accession to the European Union* (Brussels University Press, 2011; co-editor). He has also published several book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals.