

Interview – Jasmin Lilian Diab

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab (she/they) is the Director of the Institute for Migration Studies (IMS) at Lebanese American University (LAU), where she also serves as an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Migration Studies at the Department of Communication, Mobility and Identity (CMI). Dr. Diab is a Research Affiliate at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University and a Global Fellow at Brown University's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies. As of 2024, she is a Visiting Professor in Migration Studies at Sciences Po Lyon. Prior to her position at LAU, she served as the Refugee Health Program Coordinator and Research Associate in Political Economy of Health in Conflict at the Global Health Institute at the American University of Beirut (2019-2021), and as Research and Project Manager at the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Notre Dame University-Louaize (2013-2019). She holds a PhD in International Relations and Diplomacy with an emphasis on Refugees, Asylum and Security from the School of Advanced International and Political Studies' (HEIP) Center for Diplomatic and Strategic Studies (CEDS) in Paris. You can find her publications here.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field?

The field of migration, refugee, and displacement studies is currently witnessing some of the most dynamic and transformative debates. Central to these discussions is the increasing focus on intersectionality and the power dynamics embedded in forced migration. Scholars are interrogating how systemic inequalities tied to race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and class shape migration experiences and access to protection. These conversations extend to the positionality of researchers and the ethics of representation in the study of vulnerable populations. This push for nuance and complexity is reshaping how we understand and approach displacement, moving away from traditional, homogenizing narratives of refugees and migrants.

Another area of vibrant debate involves climate-induced migration and displacement, which challenges existing legal and policy frameworks. As climate change becomes an undeniable driver of mobility, questions around defining "climate migrants," their legal recognition, and mechanisms for their protection have taken center stage. The discussion also highlights a glaring Global North-South divide, with nations in the Global South disproportionately bearing the burden of climate displacement. These debates force the field to confront the inadequacies of current refugee frameworks and consider the intersection of environmental justice and migration policy.

Simultaneously, there is growing scrutiny of the top-down humanitarian system, with calls to localize aid and empower refugee-led initiatives. This push to decolonize humanitarian responses critiques the colonial underpinnings of international aid while advocating for participatory approaches that center the voices of displaced populations. This paradigm shift recognizes the agency of refugees and migrants, emphasizing the need to redress inequities in global humanitarian governance. Alongside this, debates about the role of technology in migration governance have introduced pressing ethical questions. Digital tools in border control and asylum decision-making have brought concerns about surveillance, data privacy, and human rights to the fore, reshaping how we conceptualize borders and mobility in the digital age.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

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My journey into this field was deeply shaped by my early volunteer work in refugee camps and with migrant workers during my school and high school years. Witnessing first-hand the struggles and resilience of these communities had a profound impact on me, especially as I was also living in a country like Lebanon that has been marked by cycles of conflict and displacement. My own lived experience of conflict in Lebanon added a personal layer to my understanding of these issues. It wasn't just academic curiosity—it was a lived reality that shaped my passion for uncovering the structural inequities that perpetuate harm while exploring how individuals and communities resist and reclaim their agency within these systems.

How do borders shape narratives of refugees as threats, and how can we shift this towards recognizing their rights and agency?

Borders, both physical and symbolic, often act as tools to create “us versus them” narratives, framing refugees as outsiders who threaten national security, culture, or economic stability. These narratives are deeply rooted in political agendas and media discourses that dehumanize refugees and reduce them to statistics or burdens. Shifting this requires dismantling reductionist frames and promoting storytelling by highlighting refugees as rights-bearing individuals with unique experiences, skills, and contributions. Advocacy must also focus on amplifying refugee voices in policymaking spaces, ensuring that their perspectives are integral to shaping the narratives around migration. Education, ethical journalism, and humanizing representations in cultural spaces are crucial tools to challenge the status quo and foster empathy.

How is the field of refugee studies working to include refugee voices in areas where they are misrepresented, including academia?

A particularly transformative development in the field is the emphasis on refugee voices and narrative sovereignty. Scholars and practitioners increasingly prioritize refugee-led research and storytelling, challenging whose voices are heard and valued in academic and policy circles. This focus is reshaping knowledge production by resisting outsider-led interpretations and promoting more inclusive and authentic approaches. Coupled with this, debates about protracted displacement are confronting systemic failures to resolve long-term refugee crises. As the average duration of displacement now exceeds two decades for many populations, scholars and policymakers are rethinking traditional durable solutions like repatriation, resettlement, and local integration while exploring the ethical implications of uncertainty as a political tool to delay responsibility.

Underlying many of these debates is the weaponization of migration in geopolitical conflicts. The framing of refugees as security threats and the impact of populist politics on asylum systems highlight how migration narratives are often manipulated to serve political agendas. These discussions challenge the field to rethink the role of power and discourse in shaping migration policies and public perceptions. Together, these debates demonstrate the field's dynamism, as it evolves to address the complexities of global mobility, shifting sociopolitical and economic landscapes, and the urgent need to foreground the lived realities of displaced populations.

How does political economy shape refugee health access in conflict areas, and what lessons can improve healthcare for refugees globally?

The political economy of conflict areas often determines who gets access to healthcare and who does not. Funding flows, donor priorities, and the intersections of local and international governance structures heavily influence service delivery. In many cases, refugees' access to healthcare is deprioritized or fragmented due to insufficient resources, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and discriminatory practices within host communities. Globally, one critical lesson is the need to prioritize equitable and inclusive healthcare systems that consider the unique vulnerabilities of refugees while also strengthening local healthcare infrastructure to benefit both host and displaced populations. Another key takeaway is the importance of decentralizing decision-making processes to include refugee-led organizations, as they are often best positioned to address the immediate and nuanced needs of their communities.

Your work on *Refugee Voices vs. Humanitarian Choices* examines the power dynamics between refugees and aid organizations. In what ways have refugee-led organizations in Lebanon redefined power and

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agency, and what are the major barriers they face in influencing policy and humanitarian responses?

Refugee-led organizations in Lebanon have redefined power and agency by stepping into roles traditionally dominated by international NGOs. They offer culturally attuned and community-specific solutions that are often more efficient and impactful than externally imposed interventions. These organizations challenge the paternalistic dynamics of aid by demonstrating that refugees are not passive recipients of help but active agents of change in their own lives. Their work in education, healthcare, and community organizing exemplifies resilience and innovation despite immense structural challenges. However, these organizations face significant barriers, including limited access to funding due to donor preferences for established international actors, exclusion from decision-making spaces, and restrictive legal and policy environments that curb their ability to operate freely. Overcoming these barriers requires a shift in the humanitarian sector toward genuine localization, where refugee-led initiatives are prioritized, resourced, and treated as equal partners.

Considering your work on refugee rights during the last Trump administration, how do you see U.S. refugee policy evolving?

Trump's previous administration significantly curtailed refugee admissions. He implemented travel bans targeting specific countries and framed migration as a national security threat. His re-election could further entrench these restrictive policies, leading to a continued decrease in refugee resettlement quotas, increased detention and deportation practices, and a rollback of protections for vulnerable groups such as LGBTQI+ refugees and unaccompanied minors. However, human rights advocates and civil society must remain vigilant and mobilized, pushing for accountability and leveraging international mechanisms to challenge harmful policies. One silver lining is the resilience of grassroots movements, refugee-led advocacy groups, and cities that have committed to welcoming refugees despite federal policies. These actors could be instrumental in mitigating harm and advancing a rights-based framework for refugee protection, even under hostile political climates.

Can you share some insights into your current projects and research?

My work focuses on several intersecting areas within forced migration, gender, and refugee health, with ongoing projects that explore the lived experiences of refugees and migrants in Lebanon and the broader region. One major area of research examines the mental health impacts of the 2024 Israel-Hezbollah conflict on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, building on my broader interest in how conflict shapes refugee resilience and vulnerability. I also explore how intersectional identities, such as gender and sexual orientation, influence displacement experiences. This includes analyzing the challenges faced by queer Syrian refugees and the strategies they employ for resistance, as well as investigating how female-headed Syrian refugee households navigate displacement and return.

Another key aspect of my research is refugee agency and community dynamics, particularly how young refugee communities in Lebanon negotiate hybrid identities. I also examine the alliances formed among refugee, migrant, and Lebanese women in prisons, highlighting how marginalized groups create spaces of solidarity and subversion despite systemic barriers. Additionally, I contribute to research on systemic inequalities undermining refugee sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Lebanon, aligning with my broader work on the mental health of migrant workers under Lebanon's kafala system. These projects collectively underscore the resilience of displaced and marginalized populations facing overlapping social, political, and health-related challenges.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

Make your research as trauma-informed and participatory as possible. This means recognizing the emotional and psychological impact of your work on both your participants and yourself, and approaching your research with care, empathy, and respect for lived experiences. Prioritize the voices of those most impacted by the issues you study and involve them in the research process in meaningful ways. Additionally, focus on producing work that not only adds to academic discourse but also has tangible impacts for the communities you're engaging with. Balancing critical scholarship with actionable insights can help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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