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When Blame Backfires: Syrian Refugees and Citizen Grievances in Jordan and Lebanon

Sarah Linn 

BOOK REVIEW

Baylouny, A.M. (2020). **When Blame Backfires: Syrian Refugees and Citizen Grievances in Jordan and Lebanon**. Cornell University Press, 231 pp. ISBN13: 9781501751516.

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Emerging from the Arab uprisings somewhat politically unscathed, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees at the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011 has been a socio-political catalyst for Jordan and Lebanon. Proximity to Syria has impacted Jordanian and Lebanese economies, and the sudden influx of the refugee population has created a significant strain on services. Both states have blamed Syrian refugees for the infrastructural and economic difficulties they have encountered. These proclamations of blame, reiterated by media, have created assumptions that citizens of these states agree with their governments. However, in **When Blame Backfires**, Anne Marie Baylouny argues that a transformation is taking place in state–citizen relationships in Jordan and Lebanon and that efforts to scapegoat the Syrian refugee population are backfiring. The past decade has witnessed a growth in

citizenry through social movements that are uniting people across ethnic, religious, and class divisions in both nations. Rather than blaming Syrian refugees, these movements protest state shortcomings as they demand access to better services and rights for their citizens.

Baylouny draws together the socio-political contexts of Jordan and Lebanon, showing how each state has maintained power, controlled protests, and managed past refugee arrivals. Infrastructure in both nations has long struggled to keep up with public demands. Citizens have historically relied on the private sector to provide, or supplement, basic services that are typically considered the remit of the state. Both states suffer from corruption and cronyism and fail to provide jobs for their people. Demographically, Jordan's constitutional monarchy predominantly consists of "East Bankers" and

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Palestinians. It has provided economic rights and subsidies, particularly to East Bankers, to gain support and stall political reforms while scapegoating its Palestinian population (p. 25). However, it also relies heavily on aid to support its economy. Lebanon's uneasy alliance between its Sunni, Shi'a, and Christian communities has resulted in a sedentary government that struggles to enact policies. The state is considered weak, its power and sovereignty compromised by both domestic interference from foreign states and the presence of influential non-state actors, such as Hezbollah. Basic services and rights are not easily accessible to Jordanian and Lebanese citizens, and Baylouny shows that the state has previously managed societal frustrations by emphasizing political and ethnic divisions and scapegoating minority groups. However, the scale of the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on host communities is making these traditional strategies ineffectual.

Baylouny's work is based on over 100 interviews with non-governmental organizations, host communities, and key stakeholders and is supported by additional research from newspaper reports and social media hashtags linked to protests. Following contextual analysis of both states' policies towards Syrian refugees, she explores the growth of citizenry protest that began in 2012–2013 in response to pressures on livelihoods brought on by the refugee crisis. She explains that protests were initially "little planned" and "hastily organised" at the local scale (p. 11) but have gradually grown into national movements. A key concern for Lebanese citizens is the strain on electricity and waste, while Jordanians' main concern is access to water. However, in both states, the health and education sectors are overwhelmed by the increased number of people in need. Schools run double shifts, and

housing is a significant issue as soaring rents have seen citizens evicted in favour of Syrians who will pay more out of desperation. Alongside this, humanitarian regimes provide food vouchers and free access to the health care system and education for Syrian refugees, most of whom are self-settled and living among host populations. This has led citizens to perceive a competition of resources and an inequitable distribution of goods and services favouring refugees. Alongside protesting the state, citizens are also appealing directly to municipalities and non-governmental organizations for assistance.

Responses to protests have differed, but Baylouny shows that both states scapegoat Syrian refugees, demanding international aid to address both the refugee crisis and the needs of their own citizens. However, incoming aid has exposed the depth of institutional failures. Aid money has been siphoned off by elites, failing to affect the livelihoods of citizens, particularly those in Lebanon. In both nations, there is a growing societal awareness of institutional inadequacies and a lack of assumed responsibility for pre-existing, and rapidly developing, service infrastructure failings and the absence of basic rights. The crisis has created a stronger awareness of what the state can provide, and citizens' expectations have been raised. Policy initiatives, such as the 2016 Compacts, which promoted economic development of refugee host countries while improving refugee access to the labour market, have also brought little respite to host communities. While providing aid and loans to Jordan and Lebanon, as well as access to European markets to enhance national development, the Compacts require public cuts or increased taxes to satisfy the International Monetary Fund. This enhances state–society friction, increasing citizen protests.

Individual protests have united across class and ethnic divisions to form movements that focus on “systematic issues” prevalent in each state (p. 121). These large-scale mobilizations have particularly focused on anti-austerity and anti-corruption and, therefore, Baylouny cautiously suggests, may be more successful than past actions (pp. 146–147).

Baylouny does not include any interviews with refugees as **When Blame Backfires** focuses on state–citizen relations. Yet, the inclusion of refugee perspectives, particularly regarding attitudes towards protests within their host countries, would have enriched the text and weighted her argument that refugees were not the ultimate target of protests. A brief theoretical unpacking of scapegoating in the introduction would have also assisted in more strongly framing government strategies that sought to shift blame towards Syrian refugees.

Baylouny provides important insights into the socio-political dynamics of Jordan and Lebanon and the growth of social movements and protest in the Levant following the Arab uprisings. She builds a convincing argument for the scale of the refugee crisis in Lebanon and Jordan acting as a distraction to the complex and pertinent relationships between citizen grievance and social movements. Additionally, she makes a case for these movements moving beyond economic demands to target current political systems. Baylouny has conducted research on the impact of the refugee crisis on Jordan and Lebanon since its onset, and her comparative framework of analysis enhances understanding of state processes and differing responses

to it. She raises critical questions concerning the impact of internationally celebrated policy solutions to the refugee crisis and their negative consequences on the everyday lives of citizens. This enables a thorough and more sympathetic understanding of the challenges and frustrations facing host populations that need basic rights and services. The text benefits those who are interested in social movements and socio-political relations in the Levant as well as students who seek to understand the complexity of refugee–host relations in low-middle-income nations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Linn recently completed her PhD on Syrian refugee women’s socio-spatial experiences of Amman and Beirut at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Sheffield. She is currently working on a project with refugee-background young people in the UK at Manchester Metropolitan University. She can be contacted at s.linn@mmu.ac.uk.

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