

## ARTICLE

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# Conducting Comparative Migration Research in MENA: Are the Regional Countries too Unique or too Similar for Comparisons of Refugee Policies?

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### Abstract

*The paper argues that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are neither too unique nor too similar for conducting comparative migration research. However, the systematic review of three leading journals in the field of migration studies illustrates that comparative studies addressing migration in the region remain scarce. Relying on a review of the literature and interviews with scholars conducting comparative migration research in the MENA region, this paper contends that an examination of the countries located in MENA, which are subject to the same forced mass migration situation during the same time period, is advantageous for comparative analysis. Despite these advantages, however, making comparisons within regions is a very challenging scholarly endeavor due to intra-regional variations, the rapidly changing security, political and policy environment in the regional countries, and the lack of adequate research institutions and funding supporting large-scale research. In addition to identifying advantages and challenges, this paper discusses how scholars make decisions about what to compare and how to compare in studying migration in, from and through MENA. The article also provides concrete empirical examples that address policy patterns,*

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Received on: 12.11.2019

Accepted on: 07.04.2020

*changes over time and drivers of refugee governance by comparing the cases of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.*

## Keywords

Middle East and North Africa, comparative migration, refugee policies, case selection, methodology.

## Introduction

Two regions seem particularly salient for studying refugee situations, namely the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). However, the countries of MENA have been under-represented in the theorization of migration in general, and in refugee and forced migration studies in particular in recent years. Yet comparative cases from these regions have a high potential to fill gaps in our understanding of the changing patterns in origin, transit and receiving countries as well as in informing theory pertaining to the governance of mass refugee flows. They can enhance existing theories by shedding light on the interactions between regions, particularly between the Global North and South.<sup>1</sup> Such a regional focus is crucial to challenging the dominant Euro-centric character of comparative refugee and immigration studies and to effectively question the Middle Eastern exceptionalism discourse.

This paper contends that an examination of countries located in the same region, whereby these countries are subject to the same forced mass migration situation during the same time period, is advantageous for comparative analysis. This allows the researcher to hold some variables constant, such as refugee group, origin region and timescale in order to focus on other variables. On the other hand, it is a very challenging scholarly endeavor for several reasons. The list may range from within-region variations to the rapidly changing security, political and policy environment in the regional countries, as well as the lack of adequate research institutions in the region and lack of funding supporting large-scale research.

The paper argues that MENA<sup>2</sup> is neither too unique nor its countries too highly similar to each other for conducting comparative migration research. However, there is a need for systematic comparison strategies and learning from other regional experiences. Relying on a review of the relevant literature and interviews with scholars conducting comparative migration research in the MENA region, this paper demonstrates how scholars make a decision

about what to compare and how to compare, which is part and parcel of theory-building and theory evaluation. The paper starts with a general overview of comparative research in migration studies, and then move to map the place of MENA in this literature by conducting a systematic analysis of leading migration journals— *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Journal of Comparative Migration Research*. A concrete example from comparative research addressing refugee governance in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan is provided to address ways of making comparisons to understand policy patterns, changes over time and policy drivers.

The following section addresses challenges and limitations in conducting comparative refugee studies in the region, relying on interviews with six scholars who have published more than one comparative research article about MENA. Although interview requests were made to 12 scholars, only six of them responded positively, while others had either time limitations or did not consider themselves expert enough to give an interview on comparative research designs. Scholars were asked to answer eight questions about their research experience via email in the summer of 2018. Three participants are based in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, while the other three work for British or American Universities. They all conducted long-term field work in MENA and wrote their dissertations about it. Their studies cover Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Morocco and Israel, as well as the European migration regime. While one scholar has a disciplinary background in Anthropology, one is in the Social Work and Sociology department and the other four are from the field of Political Science. The paper concludes by providing the scholars' general strategies and recommendations for coping with the challenges of comparative research. Before moving to the analysis, it is useful to give an overview of comparative research designs in migration studies.

## Main Types of Comparative Migration Research Designs

There is a wide range of variety in the comparative research designs that are adopted by migration scholars based upon their research question.<sup>3</sup> The most common type includes a spatial base, namely cross-location (among territorial settings); this type includes cross-country, cross-region and cross-province/city/town.

TYPES	UNITS OF COMPARISON	EXAMPLES
<b>Cross-location</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Among territorial settings</li> <li>- Cross-country</li> <li>- Cross-region</li> <li>- Cross-province/city/town within a specific country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Turkey, Morocco, Egypt</li> <li>- Latin America and South Asia</li> <li>- Istanbul and Gaziantep</li> </ul>
<b>Cross groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Among migrant groups (multiple groups from different countries of origin settling in a single national/ host context)</li> <li>- Among those having a different status</li> <li>- Among different migration waves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Turkish migrants and Algerian migrants in France</li> <li>- Refugees versus labor migrants</li> <li>- recently arrived Syrians versus previous Syrian migrants (such as in Lebanon)</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-meso levels</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Among organizations and institutions</li> <li>- Among migrant organizations/advocacy groups</li> <li>- Among political parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- IOM-UNHCR- Egyptian diaspora organizations in the UK</li> <li>- Rightist vs leftist parties</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Among different periods of time</li> <li>- Before and after an event (such as an economic or political crisis)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Iraqi refugees in Jordan in 2003 and after 2014</li> </ul>
<b>Combined comparisons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Both cross-country and cross-time</li> <li>- Both cross-country and cross groups</li> <li>- Both cross-country and cross-city</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pre- and post-2011 African refugee flows to Egypt and Morocco</li> <li>- Palestinians and Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan</li> <li>- Border cities in Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Variations in Comparative Research Designs in Migration Studies

Source: E. Yalaz & R. Zapata-Barrero, “Mapping the Qualitative Migration Research in Europe: An Exploratory Analysis,” in E. Yalaz & R. Zapata-Barrero (eds.), *Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies*, Cham: Springer, 2018, p. 17.

A case of cross-location comparison, might be a comparison of labor market integration policy outcomes in Canada and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> A similar topic can

be examined by conducting a cross-group comparison (among migrant groups) such as the labor market integration of three recently arrived refugee groups, such as ex-Yugoslavs, black Africans and people from the Middle East in Australia. Cross-city comparison has increased in recent years due to the local turn in migration studies. The third possible type is the cross-meso level (among organizations and

institutions), which focuses on comparisons such as examining the framings or policy impacts of different migrant advocacy groups in a certain migrant host country.<sup>5</sup> The fourth type is comparison cross-time (among different periods), such as comparing Turkey's response to mass flows of Bulgarian Turks in 1989 and of Syrians since 2011.<sup>6</sup> The last type has combined comparative designs, such as combining cross-country and cross-city. Such combinations are promising, as they may show "to what extent local decision-making processes are conditioned by the specific national legal system and which kinds of similarities and dissimilarities can be detected *ceteris paribus*."<sup>7</sup>

The type of comparison scholars select is directly related to their research question. Each topic can be studied by each type of comparison method, but the research question informs the type. For example, a cross-group research design will focus on factors related to groups, their hosting contexts and interactions among them in ways that explain differences in outcomes. Cross-time comparisons are specifically critical to see continuities and ruptures in policy-making processes.

All of these types of comparisons help in building on the empirical dimension of migration literature, accordingly enabling better-grounded analyses. As these are qualitative comparisons, they seek to present "rich, multi-layered and nuanced accounts of the ways in which various aspects of the everyday immigrant experience evolve and unfold."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they enable us to understand "perspective from within and to gain the depth and quality of information needed to provide a realistic picture of certain migration processes, causes and dynamics,"<sup>9</sup> even for exploring challenging issues such as human smuggling or refugee militarization that are prevalent in the public discourse.

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These studies are also important because migration issues are “in need of more demanding objective evidence for scientific development, as well as in need of offering viable policy routes to guide social and policy change.”<sup>10</sup> As Scholten notes, “migration researchers are a prominent voice in the public debate around issues like the refugee crisis or radicalization, and a broad range of institutes has evolved operating at the boundaries of science and politics to contribute to ‘evidence based policymaking.’”<sup>11</sup> Many methodological review studies on migration tell us that there is a lack of comparative research that might better inform evidence-based policymaking and the development of science.

### Mapping Comparative Research in Leading Migration Journals

The comprehensive analysis undertaken by Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero, who draw from 627 articles published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* that used qualitative migration research in Europe between 2000 and 2016 shows that only 15 percent of the articles used comparative research design. While they adopted various comparison types, cross-location made up more than the half of the comparisons, overwhelming cross-location, cross-time, cross-meso level and cross-group comparisons. Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero found that the share of comparative research in

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migration studies rose in the 2015–2016 period, reaching 25 percent.<sup>12</sup> In a recent study, McNally and Rahim examined the *Journal of Refugee Studies* by looking at the where the authors who published in these journals were based in to answer the question, to what extent the Refugee Studies field is global or not. They found that UK-

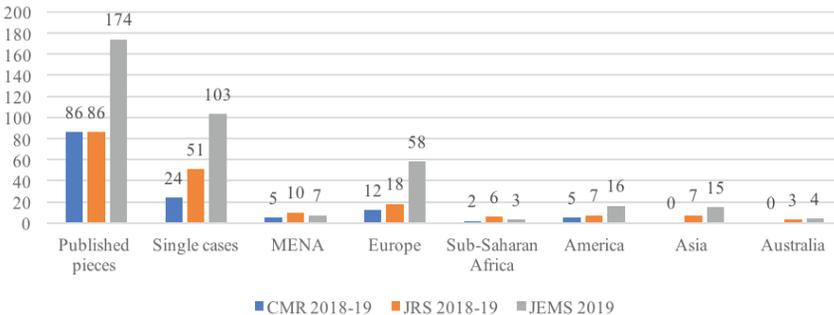
based authors dominate the journal, publishing more articles than authors from any other country. Moreover, all of the top 10 countries where authors are based are in the Global North, although the majority of refugees live in the Global South.<sup>13</sup> Although author-by-country analysis provides insights about the places of knowledge production, it gives less information about the geographical coverage in journals of the field. These types of empirical analysis have not yet been conducted for MENA-related studies. This study

aims to fill this gap by exploring the state of migration research about MENA from a methodological perspective.

To further provide empirical evidence for an overview of comparative research, I analyzed three top journals in the field of Migration and Refugee Studies, focusing on the geographical coverage of articles and the author’s methodological choices: conducting a single case study or a comparative study. To capture variations, I chose one top journal from the refugee studies field, *Journal of Refugee Studies* (JRS) and one top journal from the migration studies field, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (JEMS). Due to the specific methodological emphasis of this analysis, I also looked at the journal of *Comparative Migration Studies* (CMS). To conduct a balanced analysis, I examined the last two years of JRS and JEMS that both published four regular issues and special issues, a total 86 research articles in the two-year period between 2018 and 2019. Differently, JEMS published more: a total of 17 issues and 174 pieces in 2019 alone. Thus, I limited my analysis for JEMS to one year. In total, I drew the analyses from 346 research articles from three different leading journals. In each journal and year, I discerned the number of articles published in these journals that focus on single European countries. I checked the number of articles conducting within-Europe comparisons, those including other regions to comparisons or giving space to other regional comparisons. The regions are divided as East and South Asia, MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa, North and South America and Australia. I also note which MENA countries are covered in these three journals, and differentiate between city-level and meso-level comparisons.

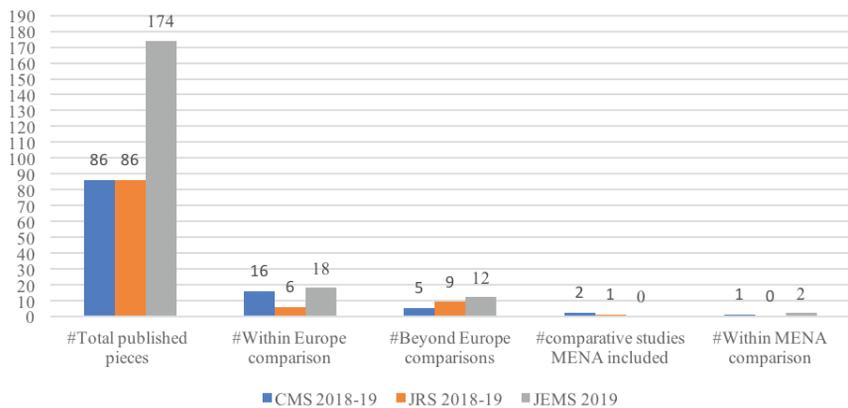
The analysis first categorizes the articles based on geographic focus: Among a total of 346 articles in three journals, 178 were designed as single case studies and focused on migrants and refugees in specific countries, while 176 focused on more global topics, theoretical debates or comparative studies.

**Articles by Region**



As the chart on the regional distribution of single case studies shows, the majority of single cases addressed European countries, particularly in Western Europe. For example, in the JEMS, the UK was the most studied country (n=15), followed by Germany (n=8), the Netherlands (n=6), Italy (n=5), Australia and Denmark (n=4) each, France (n=3), Belgium and Switzerland (n=2) each, and one article each for Norway, Ireland, Greece, Croatia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Spain. The same journal provided relatively good coverage of countries from Asia and America. However, African countries received very limited attention, only appearing in three articles.

### Comparative Studies



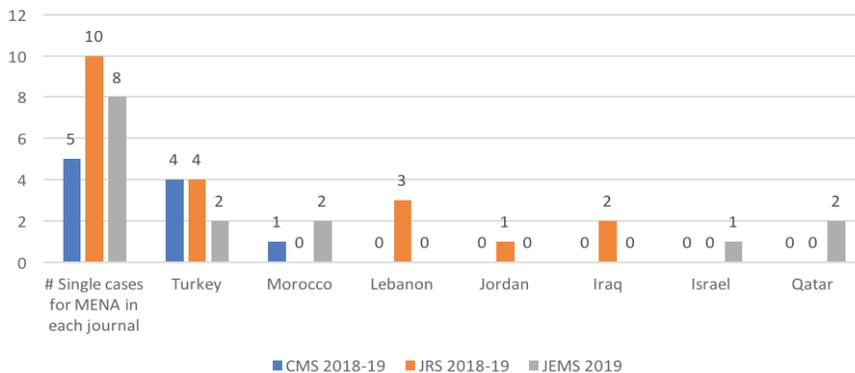
The comparative cases in each journal have some peculiarities. In general, the number of comparisons, even in the CMS, is lower than that of single case studies and theoretical articles. Among 346, only 74 articles are based on comparative design, making 21.9 percent. Interestingly, in each journal, the percentage of comparative studies are similar, around 18%, which does not confirm the expectation that the CMS might have published more comparisons. The number of within-Europe comparisons are higher than any other regions in both the CMS and JEMS. Only in the JRS are non-European comparisons (n=9) more numerous than within-Europe comparisons (n=6). One of these articles compares Greece and Turkey. The JEMS has a total of 18 within-Europe comparisons that have broad variations, including studies adopting survey analysis across countries, with two or three country comparisons. The JEMS also published articles comparing countries from different continents, particularly the U.S., with Japan, Malaysia, Canada and the Netherlands.

These journals reflect awareness regarding the imbalances in knowledge production. To this end, in 2012 the JRS published a piece criticizing the North-South dichotomies and imbalances in research networks.<sup>14</sup> The analysis of articles in the JRS’s 2018 and 2019 volumes displays that the percentage of single cases studies from MENA, Africa, Asia and Latin America are higher than that of the JEMS and CMS. Reflecting the limited number of insights from the non-Western World, the JEMS published two special issues that mainly include articles addressing issues around gender, development and migration brokerage in the Global South. The journal of CMS, as a new IMISCOE journal, was established with the specific aim of prioritizing comparative research.

### Comparative Migration Studies in the MENA

The analysis of three journals, the CMS, JRS and JEMS shows that MENA has received scant attention. It should be noted that MENA countries do not constitute a homogenous region; however, they still allow for comparative studies. In terms of single cases from MENA, the distribution shows interesting trends discussed below.

**Single Cases by Country**



Out of 178 single case studies in three journals, only 23 are from MENA countries. Among the three journals, the JRS gives more coverage of the MENA countries, particularly the three main refugee hosting countries: Turkey (n = 4), Lebanon (n = 3) and Iraq (n = 2). The CMS has also paid more attention to Turkey (n = 5) and Morocco (n = 1), in fact as an extension of the EU’s migration dynamics, more particularly with reference to the topics of externalization.<sup>15</sup>

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Due to its broader focus, covering labor migration and ethnic relations, the JEMS included the cases of Qatar and Israel. Both the CMS and JEMS have few within-MENA comparisons.

The JEMS included countries from MENA in European comparisons, for example in a study on Syrian refugees' education in Lebanon and Turkey along with Sweden, Germany and Greece.<sup>16</sup> The same journal also published an article comparing Turkey, Morocco and Moldova with a reference to the EU's visa liberation. The within-MENA comparison compared Egypt, Morocco and Turkey<sup>17</sup> to discuss policies toward migrants and refugees in the transit-turned-host countries. The sole within-MENA comparison in the CMS covered Morocco and Tunisia<sup>18</sup> to explore how political systems shape immigration policymaking. Making cross-time and cross-group comparisons are notable, for instance in an article recently published in the JRS that compares Turkey's reactions to the Syrian inflow with its responses to previous refugee groups, including Iraqis in 1988, Bosnians in 1992, Kosovars in 1998 and Chechens starting in 1999.<sup>19</sup> City-level comparisons for MENA have not yet been published, although the CMR has started to publish European city comparisons, for example between Paris and Berlin, and address city-level migration dynamics from MENA, e.g. about Cairo, Beirut, Istanbul and others.

Beside these journals, a general overview of single-case and comparative studies shows that the Middle East has been under-represented, and there has been scant attention to comparative refugee and forced migration studies.<sup>20</sup> The Levant, the Maghreb countries, the Gulf,<sup>21</sup> North Africa, the Arab states and the Mediterranean (particularly when the emphasis is on the EU) are referred to as encompassing/regional units. The Palestinian refugee issue is the most widely used refugee case due to its importance and protraction. Israel is often treated as a single case study, and studies are limited on Oman, Yemen and Iran in English language academic literature.

In terms of their scope, the articles limit their comparison to individual policy areas such as encampment,<sup>22</sup> temporary protection<sup>23</sup> and humanitarianism.<sup>24</sup> Turkey-Morocco cross-country comparison is preferred in dissertations and books when the subject is the EU's externalization of its migration policy, the policies of transit countries or the governance of irregular migration.<sup>25</sup>

Articles comparing two countries, often Lebanon and Jordan, have been published much more than comparisons of three countries with a number of exceptions.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of some contextual specificities of the region, as indeed all regions have, current comparative cases from the Middle East have a high potential to fill gaps in our understanding of the changing patterns in receiving countries, as well as in informing theory pertaining to the governance of mass refugee flows. Moreover, historically and currently, the region, particularly countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Algeria and Morocco encounter mixed migration flows that might provide insights about both the management of these flows at the country level and their relation to Mediterranean migration dynamics.<sup>27</sup> Comparative cases will also enhance existing theories by shedding light on the interactions between regions, namely between the Middle East and Europe, as well as between the Global North and South. Such a regional focus is crucial to challenge the dominant Euro-centric character of comparative refugee and immigration studies and to effectively question the Middle Eastern exceptionalism discourse.

The following section illustrates how comparative design addressing migration dynamics in the MENA region is adopted in practice and what differences it makes for the study of international migration as well as to what extent this approach holds promise for exploring policies in the region and the politics behind them. To respond to these questions, I provide a concrete empirical example below.

## Comparison of Refugee Governance in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan

Reflecting the migration dynamics of the last decade, research on single case and comparative studies addressing policies for Syrian refugees has been on the rise.<sup>28</sup> From 2011 to 2019, according to the UNHCR, ten refugee emergencies and situations have occurred/are occurring across the globe. The UNHCR webpage lists them, quite interestingly without differentiating

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between the country of origin and receiving country. While occurrences involving the Central African Republic, Burundi and Europe (migrants and refugees illegally arriving there from the Mediterranean Sea to Greece and Italy) are described as ‘refugee situations,’ others, including situations involving the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Rohingya (Muslims fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh) are called ‘refugee emergencies.’<sup>29</sup> In these cases, it is mainly in the neighboring countries that displaced people seek refuge. Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Chad and Uganda have been in every list of top refugee-hosting countries from 2013 to 2018, as they are hosting more than half of the world’s refugees.<sup>30</sup>

As these figures make evident, two regions seem particularly salient for refugee situations, namely the Middle East and Africa. An examination of countries located in the same region, whereby these countries are subject to the same forced mass migration situation during the same time period, is advantageous for comparative analysis. This allows for some variables (refugee group, region, timescale) to be held constant while some other changing variables come into focus.

The Middle East,<sup>13</sup> if we count Turkey as being part of it, hosted more refugees than any other region from 2015 to 2018, which is more than 30 percent of the world’s total refugees.<sup>31</sup> The 2018 statistics of the UNHCR demonstrate that 55 percent of world refugees come from three countries: Syria (5.5 million), Afghanistan (2.5 million) and Iraq (1.3 million) (UNHCR 2018). According to the UNHCR, among these countries at least 15 conflicts broke out or restarted between 2011 and 2015,<sup>14</sup> and the war in Syria became the largest driver of forced internal and international displacement.<sup>32</sup> Although the Iraqi and Yemeni refugee situations are two other cases that took place in the Middle East, the scale of Syrian refugee migration has made it more pertinent. In sum, these figures indicate that the Middle East, and the case of displacement from the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) in particular, are central for efforts aimed at gaining a better understanding of refugee governance.

The majority of Syrians fleeing the civil war in their country are located in Syria’s three neighboring countries: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. More than 5 million internationally displaced Syrians have found temporary refuge in these countries, while 4.9 million of them are registered with UNHCR or

respective state authorities. These countries together host around 93 percent of all internationally displaced Syrians. The Syrian refugee movement makes evident that at present (as of mid-2020), Turkey has hosted the largest number of refugees worldwide, namely, 3.5 million Syrians over a period of five consecutive years (2013–2020).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the same movement made it clear that Lebanon has hosted the largest number of refugees relative to its national population. With these figures and the protraction of the refugee situation for more than eight years, it becomes clear that these three frontline countries are central for a better understanding of the main patterns of mass refugee governance in the Middle East.

The cases of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are each quite unique and yet, still highly similar to each other. The cases enable us to adopt a similar research design. They are all upper middle-income countries with upward development trajectories.<sup>34</sup> Considering their positions in the international system, Turkey is a middle-sized state, while Jordan and Lebanon are considered small states with respect to their size, population and military and economic power. The public service provision capacities of Jordan and Lebanon are more limited than those of Turkey. Jordan and Lebanon rely on humanitarian aid from the international community to cover the expenses of refugees—like many other countries in the Global South that have encountered refugee movements in recent years. Still, all three are able to develop and implement independent policies and, to some extent, make respective shifts in their policies over time. There is no doubt that their migration regimes show some differences, as Turkey has a more institutionalized national asylum regime that complies with EU standards as well as a stronger state capacity.

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These three cases are suitable for examining the influence of a particular set of factors, namely international politics, security/domestic politics and economy/development in mass migration governance. These countries neighbor Syria, with which they have a history of close but strained bilateral

relations. Although all three had a short-lived rapprochement centered on economic relations with Syria in the 2000s, the outbreak of the armed conflict in that country in 2011 weakened the relations once again. Due to their geographical proximity, the war had a significant impact on all three countries—spilling over due to shared borders, intense ethnic, religious, sectarian, kinship, tribal and business ties among their population and, more generally, also due to disruptions in regional trade and the balance of power.

All three countries have been involved in the Syrian war since 2011 but to different degrees. The Syrian war began as a civil war but turned into a many-sided proxy war over the course of a few years. Accordingly, the stances of the neighboring countries not only took sharp turns but also came to have an increasing impact on the war. The manner in which the war unfolded did not allow them to fully detach themselves, and both Jordan and Lebanon got involved in the conflict but not to the same extent as Turkey. All three countries have faced severe challenges through the loss of border security, the infiltration of jihadist fighters and bombings in border towns. Such challenges have salient and complex domestic components. Not only national security but also regime security, defined as the maintenance of internal stability and the survival of the ruler and supporting coalitions, appear to be the main concerns for the Lebanese and Jordanian governments. Furthermore, improving the power of Iran, balancing-blocking acts towards Iran, the growing power of non-state actors, the involvement of non-regional powers as well as heavy militarization in the region have made all three countries anxious about the regional power changes and their own geostrategic positions. Overall, refugees fleeing from Syria have been approached as a highly politically sensitive issue during the Syrian crisis. Due to the high numbers of refugees, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have been required to respond to the mass migration challenge by devising policies in relevant domains. Moreover, since 2018, all three countries have sought to speed up the return of Syrian refugees to their home country, although continuing violence, political instability, persistent insecurity, destroyed infrastructure and the disruption of livelihoods hinder safe returns. While Lebanon decisively assists refugees in returning to the Syrian government-controlled regions by collaborating with the Syrian

government and intelligence agency, Turkey increasingly encourages voluntary returns to the opposition-controlled areas by collaborating with local pro-Turkey actors.<sup>35</sup>

A comparative study of three countries in the Middle East, which all host the same refugee population, is an important step forward in the understanding of policy fields, actors and patterns of refugee governance in the region. Findings from these three countries could help to formulate an original theoretical model demonstrating variations in patterns of governance as they pertain to mass refugee flows on the basis of policy type, changes in the duration of a given refugee issue and interactions with the international refugee regime. An example of a descriptive combined cross-country and cross-time comparison, basis on variation on changes in national refugee response from 2011 to 2018 can be seen below.

Country	Initial response pattern	Critical juncture transition	Protracted response pattern
	1–3 years	3–5 years	After 5 years
Turkey	Ad hoc	Regulations and restrictions	Highly regulative Moderately restrictive
Lebanon	Policy vacuum/ inaction	Ad hoc policies	Moderately regulative Moderately restrictive
Jordan	Mainly ad hoc Partially regulative	Regulative and restrictive	Highly regulative Highly restrictive

**Table 2:** Multi-stage and Multi-pattern Governance in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan

Source: Z. Şahin Mencütek, *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 245.

An example of cross-country comparison (analytical), basis on variations on independent variables, namely factors which have impact on the policies and politics of mass migration governance is demonstrated in the following table.

General explanation category	Specific factors	Sub-factors	Continuum of factors in each case		
			Turkey	Lebanon	Jordan
Economy-development	Absorption capacity	Pre-2011 cross-border mobility	Low	High	Moderate
		Economic power	High	Low	Low
	Development trajectory under threat	Refugee arrivals' pressure on infrastructure and public services	Low	High	High
		Negative impact of Syrian crisis on national economy	Low	High	High
National security / domestic politics	Likelihood of cross-border violence and of instability due to the refugee arrivals		Moderate to high	Moderate to high	Moderate
	Negative policy of legacy and memories about protracted refugee crisis		Not relevant	High (about Palestinians)	High (about Palestinians and Iraqis)
	Concerns about destabilization related to identity and political demography		Low to moderate	High	High
	Securitization and politicization of Syrian refugees		Low to moderate	Moderate to high	High
International politics	Foreign policy objectives in Syrian conflict		High (assertive)	Low (defensive)	Low (defensive)
	Expectations from international bargaining		Low to high	Low to moderate	High

**Table 3:** Factors Influencing the Governance of Syrian Mass Migration in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan

Source: Z. Şahin Mencütek, *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 258.

### Challenges and Limitations

As seen in the mapping of leading journals and books, comparison in the MENA is realizable. However, scholars of comparative migration studies face several challenges and limitations. When it comes to MENA, these challenges mount due to the characteristics of the region. Interviews with migration scholars working on MENA provide important insights as discussed below.

The first challenge that migration scholars in MENA face is the lack of basic administrative data. The data that do exist (such as the numbers of refugees, migrants and irregular migrants) are often collected with “a specified institutional context for specific purposes, using definitions that reflect their particular tasks, assumptions and preoccupations.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, even if you access a certain kind of data about migration (for example about deportations, returns or work permits), there are huge concerns about whether they measure the same phenomenon due to the use of different categories as well as questions as to whether they are complete or representative over the course of years (if we set aside the question of reliability and validity).<sup>37</sup> Some researchers also express that “common obstacles often include accessing official data, reports etc.”<sup>38</sup> Problems in accessing people for an interview, last minute cancellations, language barriers and the near impossibility of accessing state officers for interviews are noted as additional challenges, particularly with respect to difficulties in doing field work.

The second challenge involves the concepts and terminology that are used differently in national and local contexts. Examples include who is defined as a refugee or an asylum-seeker. There are a plethora of usages from displaced person(s) to guests, those under temporary protection, Syrians etc., making the access of comparable data impossible. Regarding themes, terminological conflation and their operationalization/measurement are quite problematic, as may be observed in studying integration policies (social harmony in the case of Turkey) and assimilation policies (gaps in political/public discourse and actual practices). These all make the jobs of scholars difficult in communicating with a broader audience and in preparing publications based on comparisons.<sup>39</sup>

Another important challenge involves the research environment due to “the rapidly changing security, political, and policy environment”<sup>40</sup> as well as “political uncertainty.” Additionally, “questions of ethics and positionality of the researcher”<sup>41</sup> come on the agenda. “Economic cost of fieldwork and working with translators is among the challenges faced by researchers conducting comparative migration research.”<sup>42</sup> Researchers also report having experienced the loss of data that frequently occurs in conflict or crisis zones<sup>43</sup> or confiscations of data due to the looseness of what is defined as a national security or politically sensitive issues.

### In Lieu of Conclusion: A Few Research Strategies and Recommendations for Comparative Studies

Comparisons across time, territorial units and the combination of both is possible in relation to the research question and unit of analysis on which researchers seek to focus, as previously discussed in other fields such as Political Science.<sup>44</sup> For example, from the very beginning, researchers may limit their analysis to the state level as the primary unit of analysis (relevant to disciplinary preferences) when the aim is to understand the characteristics and drivers of refugee governance. Experiences show that researchers “picked up locations where meaningful events had occurred, or one where violence happened and one where it never happened.”<sup>45</sup> Some “looked for countries in the region that would help understand variation.”<sup>46</sup> For example, one researcher started to work on Egypt, then extended the study into Morocco and Turkey, because in these three countries migration and refugee policies gained saliency beginning in the 1980s, when “neighboring Europe began to experience new migration pressures as a result of the creation of the Schengen system [that continue] up until the present.”<sup>47</sup> If the focus is on governance, the strong possibility of multi-level, multi-stage, multi-thematic, multi-sector and multi-pattern governance should be taken into account.

It is useful to specify the policy field as much as possible (labor market participation, naturalization laws, policy planning, encampment, etc.).<sup>48</sup> Policy instruments can be a reference point in designing comparisons.<sup>49</sup> While choosing cases over dependent variable - focusing on what is affected- such as policies is the common approach, the selection over independent and intervening variables -those factors driving or mediating changes- affecting policies can directly influence case selections.<sup>50</sup> Scholars also choose among the “countries that produce the most interesting political outcomes in their

responses to migration and among the factors which a comparison makes sense, so, in a most-different or most-similar fashion.”<sup>51</sup>

Avoiding hyper-specialization in migration scholarly literature is necessary to be able to compare across countries. However, as one researcher cautions, comparative work “can only stem from specialistic competence in a specific place first in order to draw lines of commonality and difference.”<sup>52</sup> For MENA, “insider knowledge on political systems, decision-making mechanisms and more informal processes of migrant/refugee integration are needed.”<sup>53</sup> To this end, using a triangulation method and consulting with country experts may help in filling gaps. To be aware of complications involved in data collection during field work, there is a necessity for “renewed caution and a heightened sense of awareness” and “maintaining a flexible fieldwork schedule” in relation to the changing security circumstances in the research environment.<sup>54</sup>

When a researcher works on an analytical topic, examining the role of a single factor such as regime type or externalization (narrowing it as much as possible) may be helpful. Developing analytical tables is useful in designing comparisons even though these tables are subject to consistent change when revisiting arguments and testing them with the new data.

For cross-comparison cases, collaboration with other scholars can be useful in coping with the challenges of conducting comparative research in the region. One comparative researcher stated that “collaborations with colleagues from the region greatly help us to strengthen the quality of the research. Even participation in seminars and workshops in the region helps us to cope with the challenges of studying a less familiar setting.”<sup>55</sup> According to another researcher, “the benefits of collaboration have increased tremendously. In the past two years, I have made it important to extend collaborations with both junior and senior researchers—otherwise, the quality of the research suffers. Plus, “collaboration is key in what we do!”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, one prominent scholar said, “I was lucky to start working on my project at the same time that a number of other Ph.D. students and junior scholars began working on migration in the region. My discussions and collaborations with scholars from Lebanon and Jordan have been invaluable in thinking through my own research questions and analysis.”<sup>57</sup>

For extending the coverage of comparisons in an inter-regional direction, extra caution is necessary. A researcher from an anthropology disciplinary background points out that “cross-continental comparisons may be also

meaningful, especially to fully grasp the complexities of North and South, and the extent to which such denominations make sense.”<sup>58</sup> Middle East-Africa or Middle East-South Asia comparisons can provide quite interesting insights.<sup>59</sup> For example, it is not quite shocking that Columbia’s welcoming response to Venezuelan people fleeing from dramatic economic crisis have similarities with Turkey and Lebanon’s response to Syrians? As another example, Pakistan’s policies regarding the protracted Afghan refugee issue have similarities with Jordan and Lebanon’s response to the protracted Palestinian refugee issue. Such examples require well-structured comparative studies that will challenge Middle Eastern exceptionalism.

Overall, comparative studies addressing MENA will contribute to providing objective evidence for scientific development and knowledge accumulation. They will also offer worthwhile routes to inform social and policy change. Conducting comparisons necessitates carefully crafted research design. Challenges are inherent component of comparisons that is possible tackled with by benefiting from both traditional and novel strategies.

## Endnotes

- 1 Large datasets on migration governance often cover countries of the Global North. Examples include the Migration Governance Index (MGI), the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), the Commitment to Development Index, the Immigration Policies in Comparison (IMPIC) project, the International Migration Policy and Law Analysis (IMPALA) Database, and the Determinants of International Migration (DEMIG) database. For an earlier critic see B.S. Chimni, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: A View from the South," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1998), pp. 350–374. For a recent critique, see S. J. Nawyn, "Migration in the Global South: Exploring New Theoretical Territory," *International Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2016), pp. 81–84.
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