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# Hybrid Political Order and the Politics of Uncertainty

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## Refugee Governance in Lebanon

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## Introduction

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a new perspective on refugee governance

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# Introduction

## Institutional ambiguity and the politics of uncertainty: a new perspective on refugee governance

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A Spring evening in 2013. I am chatting with a leader of the local Palestinian youth movement on the corniche of Tyre, the ancient port city in South Lebanon. We had met before to discuss his interpretation of the relations between Lebanese and Palestinian authorities in informal refugee settlements in the area. Not particularly interested in this issue, my interlocutor instead reflects on the challenges he and his friends face in organizing their nascent movement. One of his frustrations, he says, is that the situation and status of Palestinians in Lebanon is ‘totally clouded and unclear.’ In fact, he adds, ‘it is meant to be cloudy, we’re not supposed to understand!’<sup>1</sup>

Five years later. I am behind my computer, talking about the Lebanese response to the Syrian refugee ‘crisis’ with an experienced and context-savvy inter-agency coordinator for an international humanitarian organization on Skype. Vexed about her attempts to comprehend Lebanon’s legal and institutional framework for engaging with Syrian refugees, she sighs: ‘So, like, it all does not make sense. At least not enough sense for us to be able to understand how they’re doing it, why they’re doing it and who in the government is doing it.’<sup>2</sup> Noting my bewilderment, she laughs, adding: ‘If you’re confused, don’t worry, everybody is confused here.’

These remarks represent many similar reflections by the wide array of people with whom I discussed the way in which refugee communities in Lebanon govern and are governed. They are the point of departure for this book, which interrogates how uncertainty and ambiguity shape Lebanon’s attempts to deal with the refugees it hosts.

### Refugee governance and uncertainty

In 2018, 68.5 million people fled their homes, the highest number of refugees since World War II. The displacement of more than six million Syrians escaping their war-torn country is one of the most urgent refugee crises that the world currently faces. As with other refugee flows, the great majority of Syrian refugees seeks shelter and safety in Syria’s neighboring countries. Facilitating such ‘reception in the region’ has become the cornerstone of the international community’s

response to displacement. European policies outsource the governance of migration by investing in development in ‘the region’ and ‘deals’ with regional host countries. Many of such regional host countries that are affected by the arrival of large numbers of refugees, however, already struggle with a range of political, socio-economic, and institutional challenges.

This intersection of existing institutional predicaments and refugee crises means that regional refugee governance is often ad hoc, piecemeal, and chaotic. Considering the centrality of regional shelter in most refugee experiences as well as in international refugee policy, understanding this ‘mess,’ as a human rights lawyer called it, is of great importance.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there has been comparatively little research and even less theorization of regional host states’ treatment of refugees (Norman, 2017). To remedy this situation, this book turns to Lebanon. Lebanon hosts the highest per capita number of refugees worldwide. Sheltering approximately 200,000 Palestinian refugees and around 1.5 million Syrian refugees, it is heavily implicated in both the world’s most protracted and, arguably, most urgent refugee ‘crises’ respectively. Like many regional host countries, moreover, Lebanon grapples with a war-torn past, political instability, social and ecological tensions, and severe economic problems.

The experience of refugees in Lebanon is accordingly determined by insecurity and uncertainty. Lebanon’s refugee governance appears to be overwhelmingly fragmented and inconsistent. This is evident in the stories of refugees themselves, who describe the situation they face as ‘a lot of chaos’ (Lebanon Support, 2016: 23). It surfaces in the accounts of the humanitarian organizations that try to aid refugees. They point out the constant fear and unpredictability that refugees face in the absence of a coherent legal framework and stable policy and the resultant bureaucratic discrepancies (Amnesty International, 2015) and express many of their own challenges in assisting refugees as following from the ‘exceptional complexity’ and arbitrariness of Lebanese refugee governance.<sup>4</sup>

Uncertainty is a recurrent theme in the studies of analysts as well. These highlight the emergence of a ‘legal limbo’ (Turabay, 2015: 23) and a ‘no-policy-policy’ (El Mufti, 2014); the prevalence of ‘impromptu decisions’ (Al-Masri, 2015: 12) that is typified by ‘ad hoc changes and discretionary applications’ (Bidinger et al., 2014: 37); and, as a consequence, the ‘sea of insecurity’ in which refugees find themselves (Yassin et al., 2015: 38). It is even a central tenet in the experiences of state officials tasked with refugee governance. They acknowledge ‘that the absence of policies has created a state of chaos because of varied standards and decisions.’<sup>5</sup>

This book seeks to explore and understand this overwhelming experience of uncertainty by all major stakeholders involved in refugee governance in Lebanon. To describe such governance uncertainty, I develop the notion of ‘institutional ambiguity,’ which revolves around the key aspects of informality, liminality, and exceptionalism. The aim here, however, is to go beyond rendering visible the institutional ambiguity that shapes refugee governance and explain how such ambiguity emerges and why it prevails. The book seeks to understand how institutional ambiguity operates and is reproduced, what its effects are, and who benefits

and who suffers from its consequences.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it aims to empirically capture and analyze the strategic dimensions of institutional ambiguity, which are conceptualized as a ‘politics of uncertainty.’

As a property of refugee governance, it is assumed that the logics of institutional ambiguity will be determined by ‘refugeeness,’ the experience of forced displacement to another country, on the one hand, and by ‘governance,’ the organization of public authority, on the other hand. I thus turn to these respective literatures to venture an answer to the aforementioned questions.

## **Refugees**

Ever since the ‘birth’ of ‘the refugee’ as an object of politics, policy, and knowledge production (Malkki, 1995), uncertainty has been a key theme in the field of critical refugee studies (Nassar and Stel, 2019). Together with mobility, uncertainty is increasingly recognized as the defining feature of refugee life. Yet while the interface between uncertainty and migration is widely acknowledged, its theorization is still rudimentary. Where there is an explicit engagement with uncertainty, scholars working in critical border and refugee studies traditionally tend to focus particularly on the ‘radical uncertainty’ produced by the conflict that generated displacement and by the process of displacement itself (Horst and Grabska, 2015).

Analyses of the refugee-sovereignty nexus that think through the international state system and the production of refugees as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (Betts, 2014: 1), however, engage more explicitly with the ‘protracted uncertainty’ that emerges for refugees in host country settings after displacement (see, for instance, Brun, 2015; Gibney, 2014; Horst and Grabska, 2015; Hansen, 2014; Stepputat and Nyberg Sørensen, 2014; Zetter, 2007). Protracted displacement, Grabska and Fanjoy (2015: 76) note, often turns into protracted uncertainty ‘when plans for the future cannot be made because the past and the present are marked with precariousness and unpredictability.’ Here, by far the most attention has been paid to the ways in which refugees experience and navigate such uncertainty (see, for instance, Brun, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015; Eule et al., 2018: 51; Hasselberg, 2016; Kramer and Balaa, 2004; Marston, 2003; Norman, 2017).

Key publications have, nevertheless, been calling for an acknowledgement of uncertainty as not just a lived experience but also a potential disciplinary strategy (Ansems de Vries and Guild, 2019). Biehl (2015) has done pioneering work in outlining how refugees in Turkey are not merely living in uncertainty, but are governed through it. Norman (2017) shows how in Egypt the absence of formal refugee policy is often mistaken for neglect, whereas it in fact reflects a deliberate policy of ambivalence. El-Shaarawi (2015: 39, 46), while not investigating these policies and politics herself, flags the importance of seeing the uncertainty that refugees face as not merely ‘profoundly personal,’ but also ‘inextricable from refugee policy and politics on both the state and international level.’

These political dimensions of uncertainty, however, often remain under-explored. Chimni (2003) describes how in India the absence of a legal framework

has resulted in a situation in which there are ‘only ad hoc mechanisms in place’ to deal with refugees. This legal limbo, which he calls a form of ‘strategic ambiguity,’ has resulted in ‘arbitrary executive action’ and makes refugees ‘dependent on the benevolence of the state’ (Chimni, 2003: 443). Why exactly such ambiguity is strategic and for whom, however, is not pursued. Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban (2018) explore the ‘architecture of precarity’ designed to govern Syrian refugees in Turkey, but the agency and interests behind the production of such precarity, which they see as generating vulnerability and ambiguity, are not investigated. In fact, precarity and the resultant ambiguity are seen as symbolizing ‘the *failure* of policies to address the displacement,’ obscuring the possibility of uncertainty constituting a governance strategy in its own right (Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, 2018: 66).

Mostly, then, refugee studies acknowledges the ‘governing effects’ of uncertainty. A subsequent investigation of the agency behind such outcomes is often lacking. Recent work, however, increasingly questions if and how decisions and mechanisms that are assumed to be ‘ordering’ are in fact – and at times strategically – reproducing institutional ambiguity. The sub-field of refugee studies concerned with the study of asylum and immigration systems has been groundbreaking in conceptualizing the partially strategic nature of the ‘disjuncture, uncertainty, and ambiguity’ defining refugee governance (El-Shaarawi, 2015: 40). Calavita’s (1998: 53) seminal study reveals the ways in which immigration laws ‘actively “irregularize” people by making it all but impossible to retain legal status over time.’ Summarizing this innovative reading of institutional dysfunction, Whyte (2011: 21) argues that, in governing refugees, uncertainty is not an ‘unfortunate byproduct,’ but rather ‘fundamental to the system’s functioning as a technology of power.’ Furthering this paradigm shift, Griffiths (2013: 263) suggests that ‘disorder should be understood as a technique of power, with governance through uncertainty constructing certain immigrants as expendable, transient and ultimately, deportable.’

Scholars like Anderson (2014), De Genova (2002), Rozakou (2017), and Whyte (2011) demonstrate how authorities seek to create institutional ambiguity to minimize accountability and maximize discretionary power in dealing with irregular, often forced, migrants by ‘deliberate nonrecording’ that allows, as Kalir and Van Schendel (2017: 1) put it, for exploitation and ‘state-produced social oblivion.’ My central argument departs from this body of work that does not see institutional ambiguity as just a contingency of state failure, but rather explores it as a possibly ‘intentional state practice’ or a ‘conscious strategy’ to abandon, expel, exploit, or discipline particular societal groups (Kalir and Van Schendel, 2017: 2; Whyte, 2011: 18).

### **Governance**

Governance broadly refers to processes to organize collective representation and accountability and the provision of public goods. This is not, and has never been, a privilege of the state, but regards a set of interactions involving multiple societal

actors (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde, 2006: 85; Rose and Miller, 1992). Following Foucault (1983), to govern means to determine the field of action of others. It thereby refers to a 'more or less systematized' mode of power (Lemke, 2000: 5). More specifically, in this book, governance refers to acknowledging specific issues, groups, or spaces, producing frameworks to regulate them, and enforcing these frameworks. Policies – sets of instructions issued by a specific governance actor on how to reach a particular governance goal that can range from laws to decrees or other executive decisions – and the related implementation processes are a crucial aspect of governance.<sup>7</sup>

In this book, the particular governance issues that are under scrutiny regard refugees' status, spaces, and representation. These domains of governance are selected because they fundamentally determine the parameters of refugees' presence in a host country and thereby predispose other aspects of refugee life, such as security, mobility, and access to services. Refugee status refers to whether refugees are legally acknowledged as refugees, but also to their residency status and the related registration and recording procedures. Refugee spaces pertain to the arrangements for refugees' shelter and tenure and the associated legal frameworks and political decisions, often with encampment as a central contention. Refugee representation on the one hand concerns the mandates allocated by the host country considering who is responsible for dealing with what aspects of refugees' presence. On the other hand, it relates to the question of who speaks for refugees and acts on their behalf and the internal organization of refugee communities.

Governance is mostly understood as an attempt to minimize ambiguity by creating rules and regulations and ensuring their implementation in a standardized manner, with bureaucratic organizations acting as 'ambiguity-reducing machines' (Best, 2012: 91). Yet, uncertainty and unpredictability are a fact of life everywhere. This is often the inescapable effect of 'bureaucratic muddling through' and 'fuzziness' (Davenport and Leitch, 2005: 4) or of 'policy flaws' caused by 'decision accretion' (Smithson, 1989: 239). Ambiguity is then either an inevitable manifestation of an inherently 'unknowable world' or 'residual,' surviving despite efforts to minimize it (Best, 2012: 92, 91). But ambiguity can also be the result of concerted efforts. Foucault has long recognized the disciplinary power of uncertainty. In critical management studies, 'strategic ambiguity' is defined as 'the deliberate use of ambiguity in strategic communication' to allow for multiple interpretations (Davenport and Leitch, 2005: 2). Legal scholars have also pointed out the centrality of 'legal ambiguity' in structuring governance, which, Oomen et al. (2019: 7) note, is often purposefully invoked and expanded.

The notion of strategic ambiguity assumes that uncertainty serves purposes, that it is politically convenient and therefore strategically deployed (Aradau, 2017: 339). Such convenience can regard general public interests: political decision-makers may need to deal with limited capacities and resources or to broker consensus, for which ambiguity can be advantageous. Navigating 'competing interests' often results in 'negotiated compromises that are purposively vague' so as to facilitate 'unified diversity' (Davenport and Leitch, 2005: 3).

Ho (2001: 400) even calls ‘institutional indeterminacy’ the ‘lubricant’ on which governance runs. Ambiguity also allows governance actors to be flexible and adaptive. Policy-makers’ insistence on ‘clarity and rule promulgation’ can be counter-productive, because passing legislation ‘often requires ambiguous language and contradictory goals to hold together a passing coalition’ (Matland, 1995: 147). Strategic ambiguity can also follow from private interests, producing the maneuvering space in which political decision-makers maximize their own influence at the expense of others. Finally, strategic ambiguity can serve more specific political objectives concerning the governance of particular groups, spaces, or issues (Nassar and Stel, 2019).

Uncertainty, evidently, is more profound for some people than for others and more apparent at some times and in some places. The ‘governing effects’ of uncertainty that are fundamental in refugee studies, then, are a core concern in the literature on hybrid political order as well. This field of study, further discussed in Chapter 1, focuses on the question of how governance operates ‘beyond government’ (Risse, 2013) or under ‘split sovereignty’ (Hoffman and Kirk, 2013) when state authorities are unable or unwilling to take on the extensive range of exclusive governance activities assumed by the Weberian ideal-type. Uncertainty is mostly taken for granted and assumed to be a structural feature of these contexts. The question of how public and political authorities operate in such hybridity and whether their behaviour challenges, extends, or exacerbates it is only rarely addressed.

This book builds on and extends the notable exceptions to this situation. Chabal and Daloz’s (1999) book on ‘disorder as a political instrument’ produced a paradigm shift in debates about patronage and neopatrimonialism. It agendized the importance of recognizing ‘disorder’ as a ‘different order’ in which political actors can capitalize on an existing ‘state of confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes even chaos’ by perpetuating and aggravating it (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: xix). Administrative ‘inefficiency,’ minimal institutionalization, and the relativity of formal rules then become cause as much as consequence of hybrid forms of political order. Das and Poole’s (2004) influential reading of state power as operating through unpredictability and ‘unreadability’ has further theorized the disciplining effect of inaccessible information and opaque decision-making. Tapscott’s (2017: 263) ground-breaking work on institutionalized arbitrariness further conceptualizes this utility of fostering unpredictability and uncertainty as a mode of governance.

### **Contingent and strategic uncertainty**

Work on refugees and governance thus tends to regard uncertainty as overwhelmingly contingent, either upon the refugee condition defined by unexpected displacement and temporary settlement or upon a hybrid governance context determined by ‘weak institutions’ and a lack of capacity and resources. Yet in both literatures, there are increasingly influential alternative readings of

uncertainty as well. These contend that such exclusively structural analyses are insufficient as they overlook important elements of agency, interests, and responsibility in the emergence, institutionalization, and reproduction of governance uncertainty. They suggest that disorder does not have to be the antithesis to dominance, as often intuitively assumed, but can be an instrument of it (Cullen Dunn, 2012: 2). As is the case with the governance of security, refugee governance practices do not just tame unknowns, but also enact and utilize them (Aradau, 2017: 329).

This book works with this idea of strategic ambiguity – with uncertainty consistently recurring and demonstrably serving interests – in exploring the institutional inconsistency that permeates refugee governance in Lebanon. It does so by synthesizing and sophisticating the core tenets of these emerging literatures in, first, a heuristic device – institutional ambiguity – and, second, an explanation of the agential aspects of the production and reproduction of institutional ambiguity – the politics of uncertainty. Crucially, the book does not contend that institutional ambiguity is only, or even predominantly, strategic. As proposed by structuration theory, agency and structure, strategy and contingency, constitute a dialectic (Giddens, 1984). I put analytical premium on the strategic aspects of the emergence and endurance of institutional ambiguity because these are conceptually underdeveloped and, perhaps therefore, empirically striking and as such offer the most significant room for contribution.

The idea that uncertainty and insecurity were not simply incidental or circumstantial but also partially strategic surfaced in many of the accounts that underlie my analysis. Refugees keenly felt the repressive aspects of ambiguity. The frustrated remark of a Palestinian youth leader with which I opened this chapter was what got me thinking about the politics behind uncertainty in the first place. Humanitarians and civil society representatives also routinely pointed out the interests underpinning vague and absent policies and arbitrary implementation dynamics. A project manager for a non-governmental organization (NGO) working with refugees in the Bekaa and North Lebanon was convinced that ‘the whole thing has been intentionally left informal, non-regulated; or regulated but not enforced.’<sup>8</sup>

Even Lebanese state representatives described the treatment of refugees in the country as trapping them in an ‘institutional void’: a ministerial advisor referred to the agency behind the non-policy towards Syrian refugees, saying that ‘someone refused to organize the presence of the Syrian displaced.’<sup>9</sup> As previously presented in Nassar and Stel (2019), analysts working on refugee governance in Lebanon similarly emphasize the strategic aspects of the legal, spatial, and political uncertainty faced by refugees, calling ‘the absence of policy and governance’ a ‘strategy of exploitation’<sup>10</sup> and suggesting that governance appears to be ‘clearly aimed’ at ‘maintaining nebulosity’ (Ghanem, 2016: 54). In light of this situation, the book’s core research interest is to understand how institutional ambiguity operates as a partly strategic governance modality to deal with refugee ‘crises’ in Lebanon.



### ***Institutional ambiguity***

Ambiguity refers to plurality of definition, meaning, and interpretation. Ambiguity produces uncertainty in the sense that, as Tapscott (2018) defines it, governance policies and practices are ‘experienced as meaningfully unpredictable by those for whom they are of political consequence.’ I use institutional ambiguity to synthesize a vast array of concepts used across disciplines. It is a tool to capture the institutionalization, with which I mean the recurrence and (tacit) acceptance, of ambiguity as operating on three main axes: informality, liminality, and exceptionalism. These three dimensions of institutional ambiguity, as apparent in the following operationalization, extensively overlap and constitute each other to produce a broader environment of inconsistent, partial, and negotiable institutionalization.

### ***Informality***

I understand formal governance as those issues, spaces, and populations that are recognized and addressed in official state policies (Yassin, Stel and Rassi, 2016). Informality, then, regards those governance concerns that are not acknowledged, regulated, and/or made implementable by the state. Importantly, this does not mean that these issues, spaces, and populations are not governed. They are likely to be taken on by non-state governance actors, or even by state governance actors, but in an unofficial, *de facto* capacity rather than a *de jure* fashion. Informality is thereby closely related to illegality, extra-legality, and the criminalization of refugees (De Genova, 2002; Zaiotti, 2006). The absence of formal refugee or residency status infamously contributes to stripping refugees from the ‘right to have rights.’ Informal governance also analytically associates with bureaucratic invisibility and illegibility as it can render refugees (or other categories of people) administratively nonexistent (Griffiths, 2013; Janmyr and Mourad, 2018; Kalir and Rozakou, 2016).

Informality makes governance irregular and personalized and thereby more unpredictable but also more pliable and negotiable for those able to navigate and instrumentalize ‘a shifting and ill-defined’ boundary between public and private (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 149). Like liminality and exceptionalism, it is not a binary category. Refugee status, for instance, might be denied, but other (temporary and exceptional) administrative categorizations can be devised to nevertheless allow a form of regulation. Refugee shelter arrangements, to give another example, might be acknowledged formally by some state institutions, whereas they are not recognized by others. Refugees’ representation structures, similarly, could be acknowledged and regulated by state institutions, but be partially informal nevertheless if the relevant directives and decisions are not implemented or enforced.

When explored from the perspective of a politics of uncertainty, it is particularly ‘planned illegality’ (Chiodelli, 2012) and the imposition of informality – under

which refugees are ‘led to break the law in order to survive’ (Agier, 2008: 12) – that is at stake. If formally governing something means that the state makes itself responsible for it, then the governance inaction that renders refugee governance informal is an act of abandonment. In this way, my understanding of such potentially ‘purposeful informality’ (Polese, Kóvacs and Jancsics, 2018: 208) closely resonates with the idea of informality as an expression of sovereignty. Informality, then, is not a challenge to the state as much as it is produced by the state itself. Following Roy (2005: 149), state agencies themselves ‘determine what is informal and what is not’ and ‘which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear.’ Even in hybrid political orders rife with capacity problems, formal recognition, regulation, and enforcement are never just a bureaucratic or technical issue. They involve significant political choice and struggle. To study informality, then, means confronting how the state is not simply an apparatus of planning, but a system that ‘produces the unplanned and unplannable’ (Roy, 2005: 156 in Nassar and Stel, 2019).

### *Liminality*

Liminality engages with the notion of temporal uncertainty. As Agier (2008: 30) so imperatively noted, the word ‘refuge’ itself ‘denotes a temporary shelter, while waiting for something better.’ Neither refugees nor the states hosting them know if and when refugees may return. Liminality is thus a default cornerstone of refugee life, but it is also a characteristic of hybrid order, where suspension and undeterminedness can be important ingredients of political capital. In the context of thinking through a politics of uncertainty, then, liminality is closely related to exceptionalism in that it is something that can be extended and instrumentalized by placing specific issues, communities, or spaces ‘in between’ (Menjívar, 2006: 999) or ‘outside’ (Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson, 2013: 5) time, putting them forever ‘on hold’ (Agier, 2008: 47). This turns crisis from an opportunity for transformation into an instrument to maintain the status quo (Hage, 2015: 1).

Liminality regards the constantly reinforced transitional and temporary nature of governance practices. It refers to a ‘permanent impermanence’ (Brun, 2015: 19), a ‘stuckness’ (Hage, 2009) that characterizes the increasingly protracted nature of most refugee situations and results in ad hoc arrangements and a ‘dominance of the short-term’ (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 161). Liminal arrangements are unstable and place people in limbo. They preclude integration and institutionalization and reinforce transience. This ‘liquid’ appropriation of time, as Bauman (2007) theorized, reflects and enables the pervasiveness of uncertainty. Temporal uncertainty denotes a dual ambivalence with regard to time as it ‘simultaneously threatens imminent and absent change;’ ‘stickiness’ and ‘suspension’ on the one hand and ‘frenzy’ and ‘rupture’ on the other (Griffiths, 2014). Thus, as a component of institutional ambiguity, liminality captures the simultaneous processes of stasis and transformation.

An extensive literature concerned with the governmentality of waiting indicates the disciplinary power of making people wait without ‘purpose, fairness or progression,’ rendering their experience of time and life simultaneously meaningless and endless (Brun, 2015: 19; see also Anderson, 2014; Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson, 2013; Jefferson, Turner and Jensen, 2019). At the same time, work on deportation and deportability refers to the implications of acute and unexpected change imposed on people that is similarly enabled by the conditionality inherent in ‘permanent temporariness’ (Cullen Dunn, 2014: 304; see also Franck, 2017). This can add up to what Tazzioli (2017) has conceptualized as ‘containment through mobility,’ a situation in which people are temporally pinned down through spatial relocation.

Building on foundational work regarding the ‘strong relationship between power, the state and management of time,’ liminality refers to more than just indecisiveness or even stalling, but regards time as a potential instrument of control (Rutz, 1992 in Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson, 2013: 29). This disciplinary effect of time can be a result of neglect or inherent in bureaucracy, but ‘time traps’ can also reflect strategy and design (Eule et al., 2018: 151, 160–161). Being made to wait as well as being subjected to acute and dramatic institutional ruptures are reflections of power relations and bureaucratic domination. Protracted temporariness and ‘ageing’ emergencies are not inevitable (Carpi, 2015a). They are, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has well-noted (2004: 2 in Milner, 2014: 153), ‘the result of political action and inaction.’

### *Exceptionalism*

The idea of a ‘state of exception,’ coined by Agamben (2005) and extended, adapted, and nuanced by many others, has its roots in critical refugee studies. It denotes a central paradox of governance by marking specific groups or issues as outside normal legal and political regimes, but inside specific surveillance and repression mechanisms. Exclusion, ‘outsideness,’ and ‘othering’ in one realm are complemented by extreme discipline in other domains (El-Shaarawi, 2015: 40; Hanafi and Long, 2010; Salter, 2008) – dynamics that are routinely legitimized through securitization processes (Nassar and Stel, 2019). Crucially, then, the analytical value of exceptionalism as a component of institutional ambiguity does not lie in its sometimes assumed establishment of a high totalitarian order by an apparently cohesive sovereign. Rather, what exceptionalism signifies is the arbitrary definition and application of regulations and mandates. Exceptionalism, Carpi (2017: 121) established, is not a ‘product of fate,’ but rather of experimentation (Turner, 2005: 318). It can be imposed and lifted, defined and redefined, resulting in unpredictably changing rules of the game. As Cons (2007: 21) concludes, exceptionality is not a neat in/out binary. Instead, it ‘produces an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, insecurity and confusion’ that allows and facilitates exploitation and enhances the discretionary power of authorities (Cons, 2007: 21).

This materializes through legal and spatial governance practices. Legally, exceptionalism denotes the political and administrative distinctions between different categories of people – refugees and citizens, for instance – and the ways in which arbitrariness becomes a routine everyday experience for populations that are placed outside any such categorizations in legal ‘gray’ areas (Menjivar, 2006). This makes them dependent on the goodwill of those holding power over them. The idea of exceptionalism compellingly reveals that legal suspensions or voids tend not to be ‘filled by an ethics of care and responsibility,’ but are rather signals ‘that a particular class of persons exists only at the mercy of the state’ (Chimni, 2003: 465). The exceptionalism invoked by discourses of crisis<sup>11</sup> and ‘perpetuated emergency’ allows for governance actors to shirk responsibility while retaining authority (De Genova and Tazzioli, 2016; Janmyr and Knudsen, 2016: 391). It produces for particular groups the ‘experience of a fragile and uncertain relationship to the law and to states’ (Agier, 2008: 11; see also Cons, 2007: 24).

Spatial exceptionalism is especially apparent in encampment policies. These often materialize refugees’ informality and simultaneously entrench it. Refugee camps both signpost and ensure the temporary nature of refugees’ presence, ‘warehousing’ them for protracted periods of time in ‘suspended spaces’ without ever acknowledging this de facto permanence (Janmyr and Knudsen, 2016: 391). Refugee camps and detention and deportation centres, as well as ‘sensitive spaces’ such as borderlands and frontiers more broadly, are spaces taken outside the legal order, but nevertheless, and thereby, integral to the political order (Agamben, 2005; for reflection and critique, see Agier, 2011; Diken, 2004; El-Shaarawi, 2015; Hanafi, 2008; Hanafi and Long, 2010; Malkki, 1995; Ramadan, 2009; Ramadan and Fregonese, 2017). As with legal exceptionalism, this entails simultaneously claiming control and denying responsibility in and for these spaces (Cons, 2007; Tapscott, 2017, 2018). Refugee settlements, ‘ambiguous spaces’ of concurrent inclusion and exclusion (Oesch, 2017), thereby become sites of abandonment, spaces that are ‘knowingly neglected’ (Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi, 2017: 18) or ambiguously and precariously outsourced, generating complex governance assemblages and layered forms of sovereignty.

### ***The politics of uncertainty***<sup>12</sup>

My interpretation of a politics of uncertainty starts out from an anthropological understanding of uncertainty. This suggests that uncertainty can best be understood through the analysis of the empirical manifestation of particular governmentalities in specific, and subjective, technologies and experiences (Samimian-Darash and Rabinow, 2015). The notion of a politics of uncertainty acknowledges that institutional ambiguity will be part of any governance practice. In particular, it will be in place by the general settings of hybrid political order and will be extended through the behaviour of authorities that pursue the overall aim of staying in power (or gaining power) and governing ‘cheap and efficiently’ in such settings (Tapscott, 2017: 268). What the idea of a politics of uncertainty adds is accounting for the

possibility that institutional ambiguity also follows from more specific attempts to manage ‘problematic’ populations, here refugees. It posits that a combination of inaction and ambiguous action reproduces informality, liminality, and exceptionalism towards a specific population, following more specific interests that go beyond the generic objective of accumulating and preserving power.

Institutional ambiguity often results from inaction in the realm of formal political decision-making (Barber, 2017). Governance inaction manifests itself in a lack of official acknowledgement, regulation, and enforcement of particular issues; the extent to which matters relating to, in my case, refugees are recognized and addressed in policies and the degree to which such policies are subsequently followed up on. In the context of the politics of uncertainty, inaction is only analytically salient if it regards an issue that formally falls within the jurisdiction of the governance actor in question – if, in other words, an authority could have acted but did not (McConnell and ‘t Hart, 2014).

The notion of inaction closely resonates with work on ‘standoffish policy-making’ (Mourad, 2017; Slater and Kim, 2015), street-level bureaucrats’ ‘shirking’ behaviour (Lipsky, 1980 in Eule et al., 2018: 212), the ‘politics of doing nothing’ (McConnell and ‘t Hart, 2014), and the structural violence of ‘political abandonment’ (Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi, 2017; Davies and Polese, 2015; Gupta, 2012). ‘Policy-as-indifference,’ a term coined by Norman (2019), can function as a form of de facto outsourcing. As El-Shaarawi (2015: 47) notes, for instance, ‘passive non-response’ towards the arrival of Iraqi refugees marginalized them and made them disregard Egypt as a place of permanent settlement. A ‘not-dealing-with’ modality of governance, as Kalir and Van Schendel (2017: 6) have called it, is also evident in processes of ‘active’ non-recording and suspension of official decision-making.

Although passivity can stem from a lack of capacities and resources, these different conceptualizations of governance inaction all demonstrate that it may be a choice as well. Although passivity is often depicted as apolitical or indicating neutrality, McConnell and ‘t Hart (2014) convincingly argue that ‘doing nothing’ is at heart a political activity. Inactivity, then, just as much as political action, Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi (2017: 19) show, ‘can be wielded as a means of control, coercion and power.’ Following the logic of nonperformativity, inaction may often be cloaked, and even facilitated, by apparent proactiveness (Ahmed, 2004, 2006; Norman, 2005: 196; Pinker, 2015: 99). The very pronouncement of a decision may then serve to in fact deter the actual implementation of the same decision, with a ‘tacit interest’ working to ‘contradict the stated aim or goal of the inquiry’ (McGoey, 2007: 219).

In addition to governance inaction, the politics of uncertainty is constituted by ambiguous action that retains and exploits informality, liminality, and exceptionalism. At times, governance actors’ approach of issues related to refugee status, space, and representation is primarily determined by inertia and avoidance, but such inaction is never total or predictable. In many instances issues will be recognized, decisions on how to regulate them will be made, and efforts

towards implementing such regulations will be proposed. Yet, such recognitions, decisions, and proposals are often ‘equivocally phrased’ (Best, 2012: 92): partial, inconsistent, or vague. Policy objectives, instruments, and planning are routinely unclear. Documents or papers, often regarded as the summit of rational, accountable statecraft, are in practice mostly as ‘tenuous and provisional as the political relationships with which they were entangled’ (Pinker, 2015: 119; see also Hull, 2012). Interestingly, even the proliferation of policy can work as a form of policy ambiguity. Eule et al. (2018: 41) show that migration policies are often highly changeable. This makes them unstable and far less coherent and unified than usually assumed by both those implementing them and those subjected to them.

Statements, circulars, mandates, and directives can leave excessive room for contestation, interpretation, and discretion through implicit formulations, contradictory communication, and incomplete or fragmented operationalizations. They produce confusion, but, through that, opportunity and room for maneuver as well. Such ambivalence or anticipation may be inevitable components of governance, but, as the field of critical policy studies emphasizes, they are also shaped and manipulated in both the formulation of policies – their wording and identification of priorities, instruments, and implementers – and the varied decisions constituting the subsequent implementation and inevitable interpretation and negotiation of policies. Anthropologists of the state have increasingly shown how, as a result, ‘state power is reproduced through practices that are less than coherent or fully rationalized, emerging rather as shifting, illegible, decentred, contingent, or capricious’ (Pinker and Harvey, 2015: 17).

Inaction and ambiguous action will always be part and parcel of governance. Policy-making always lags behind societal needs. And when policies are formulated, they are always at least partly ambiguous: Objectives and instruments are often very general and mandates and responsibilities regularly vague. Laws usually designate what cannot be done, but, as Eule et al. (2018: 86) point out, ‘rarely encompasses the full range of possible actions we *may* undertake.’ This means that state officials always have substantial discretionary power that is located both in policies themselves and in limited institutional oversight (Eule et al., 2018: 81). Even if policies are relatively clear-cut, policy implementation – with its shifting and complex contexts and various, often competing, actors and the contending and complementary interpretations and interests associated with them – will inevitably produce unintended outcomes, diffuse much of the clarity that might be part of carefully formulated policies, and result in institutional ambiguity.

What I am interested in here, however, is strategic institutional ambiguity. To purport that institutional ambiguity is at least partly strategic is to assume that it serves interests, which may be actively pursued or indirectly determine decision-making. These can regard political objectives to gain and hold onto power, or particular concerns regarding the governance of certain groups, spaces, and issues. These different functions of institutional ambiguity will importantly overlap. Concerns related to generic making-do in challenging circumstances and brokering compromises among various stakeholders will be informed by political concerns

to amplify power and complemented by yet different incentives related to managing specific crises or to subdue, exploit, or remove specific groups. Institutional ambiguity will always be both contingent and strategic, and when strategic, it serves both more pragmatic and generic governance interests and more political and specific ones. My focus in this book, however, will be predominantly on the latter type.

The functionality of a politics of uncertainty has two dimensions. These, as accounted for in Chapter 6, crucially intertwine and interact. For those doing the governing, institutional ambiguity serves to create room for interpretation and maneuver. This flexibility or leeway grants governing actors bargaining power. It also generates limited transparency and a form of ‘diffuse’ (Hull, 2012: 115) or ‘deniable’ (Davenport and Leitch, 2005: 4) responsibility that ultimately produces unaccountability and impunity for governance actors. This is a general form of arbitrary governance that maximizes power generically (Tapscott, 2017), but it simultaneously produces effects on the level of those being governed that might be politically convenient as well.

Informality, liminality, and exceptionalism generate vulnerability, hampering refugees’ access to livelihoods and protection (Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, 2018; Saghieh, 2015). This contributes to their controllability, exploitability, and deportability, but institutional ambiguity also disciplines more directly. For those being subjected to it, institutional ambiguity produces uncertainty, confusion, and ambivalence. Unpredictability, or destabilization of expectations, undermines agency and results in demobilization. This is by no means absolute. The ‘governed’ also govern themselves and subvert and resist forms of uncertainty that they face (Hasselberg, 2016). Although power is not unidirectional, it is fundamentally asymmetrical. The concern of this book, therefore, is with the ways in which uncertainty constrains and limits the people that face it. Informality, liminality, and exceptionalism undermine people’s ability to plan and act and trap them in precariousness by producing anxiety, instability, and passiveness (Nassar and Stel, 2019). Cullen Dunn (2014: 300) has captured the disciplinary power of uncertainty in the term ‘absolute zero’ to denote how pervasive and enduring institutional ambiguity can paralyze people, draining them of energy and impeding them to act as coherent subjects. For people to meaningfully or constructively relate to a governance actor, for instance, there must be an understanding of what or who this actor is and what its prerogatives and responsibilities are (Tapscott, 2017).

As further conceptualized in Chapter 6, institutional ambiguity amounts to a politics of uncertainty when it operates as a precondition for the control, exploitation, and expulsion of refugees that serves the actors that produce it through lacking or ambiguous governance. Institutional ambiguity serves to control refugees, because it makes them ‘insecure, passive and pessimistic’ (Griffiths, 2013: 280). It prevents them from planning, organizing, and mobilizing as they have no way to credibly anticipate the consequences of any action (Eule et al., 2018: 93). Crucially, in the case of refugees, authorities will not seek to discipline them in

the traditional Foucauldian sense that assumes citizens that ultimately need to be included in the governance fold. Rather, the form of control aspired to regarding refugees – especially in contexts such as Lebanon where integration is widely seen as entirely undesirable – is one premised on exclusion, distancing, and demobilization, a form of control that allows for exploitation as well as eventual expulsion.

‘Chronic uncertainty’ and the ‘ontological insecurity’ it produces can physically and mentally destabilize people to the extent that they are made passive and innocuous (El-Shaarawi, 2015: 40, 46–47, 52; Griffiths, 2014: 2005; Whyte, 2011: 21). The destabilization of expectations, the undermining of rights, the fragmentation of networks, and the production of existential challenges related to shelter, security, and health that follow from institutional ambiguity make refugees dependent on and exploitable for Lebanese strongmen, mediators, and brokers who – as Chapter 1 will show – are closely connected to the Lebanese authorities that are at the root of institutional ambiguity. The extra-legality and social vulnerability manufactured through institutional ambiguity, finally, renders refugees ‘deportable.’ Existential destitution ‘encourages’ refugees to consider return or further flight even if these options are entirely unsafe and legal limbo facilitates deportation in a more direct sense.

## **Studying ambiguity and uncertainty: methods and approach**

To understand how institutional ambiguity operates in the context of Lebanese refugee governance and, more specifically, how and why it emerges and is maintained, extended, navigated, and contested, requires a specific methodological and analytical approach.

The empirical analysis central to this book draws on two case-studies that represent two different research projects of which relevant information about data generation will be provided in more detail in the respective chapters. The Palestinian case-study reflects a longer-term study into the local governance dynamics in informal Palestinian refugee settlements in South Lebanon (Stel, 2017). The pertinence of systematic uncertainty and the political drivers of this reality here surfaced in an inductive way as one of the main factors explaining why Palestinian authorities and Lebanese local governance representatives interacted the way they did.

This realization that institutional ambiguity is a key aspect of refugee governance in Lebanon was subsequently explored more deductively in the research constituting the Syrian case-study. This entailed a more targeted exploration of the causes, characteristics, and consequences of the informality, liminality, and exceptionalism that – desk research quickly revealed – determined Lebanon’s response to this new refugee ‘crisis’ in perhaps even starker degrees.<sup>13</sup> Key research questions here were: How does institutional ambiguity manifest itself, nationally and locally, for different groups of stakeholders? Who benefits from such ambiguity or is empowered by it (economically, politically, socially) and who is disadvantaged



or marginalized as a result of it? How is it reproduced, navigated, and defied? What are the root causes of institutional ambiguity, and how do these relate to questions of capacity and political will?

The selection of these two case-studies thus followed from an empirical imperative to better understand Lebanon's governance of subsequent and mutually reinforcing refugee 'crises.' My book, however, also aspires to further our theoretical understanding of the (re-)production of institutional ambiguity and to help sophisticate the analytical toolkit available to study this issue. Following Ragin's (1994) perspective on research as a dialogue between evidence and ideas, then, my empirical cases are not only a means to extend a theoretical idea and my conceptualizations are more than merely the instrument to understand an empirical phenomenon. The interplay between empirical and conceptual questions allows for a constructive and innovative engagement with both.

From a theoretical perspective, therefore, my focus on refugee governance in Lebanon functions as an extreme case-study into institutional ambiguity and the politics of uncertainty at large. Exploring the governance of refugees, a category of people facing particular uncertainty, in Lebanon, a country that, as a hybrid political order, is known to be particularly ambiguous in terms of politics and institutions, provides a unique window to capture and analyze the politics of uncertainty that might be at work more subtly in many other instances. By deliberately focusing on exceptional levels of uncertainty, institutional ambiguity as an empirical phenomenon becomes visible and researchable.<sup>14</sup>

The mutually reinforcing empirical and theoretical ambitions at the heart of this book pose the not-insignificant question of how to study inaction and ambiguous action. How to locate and make sense of things that are either not there – in the case of inaction – or inherently vague – in the case of ambiguous action? In analyzing the strategic aspects of institutional ambiguity, the imperative is to establish how institutional ambiguity follows from specific decisions in policy formulation and policy implementation and to tease out the interests driving these decisions. But how to get at motivations that are often unconscious or disguised? Institutional ambiguity, by its very nature, ironically defies – and, when part of a politics of uncertainty, is meant to defy – understanding and thereby analysis.

I engaged with this fundamental challenge by drawing on methodological and analytical strategies developed in the field of ignorance studies, that is introduced in more detail in Chapter 6, which purports that not-knowing can be considered an 'active accomplishment' and is often strategically feigned, maintained, or imposed (Gross and McGoey, 2015: 5; see also Cons, 2007; Lindberg and Borrelli, 2019; Nassar and Stel, 2019; Stel, 2019). Such an approach to capturing the politics of uncertainty is inspired by postcolonial and feminist theory that signaled the ways in which class, gender, and race 'produce absences of knowledge' (Croissant, 2014: 11) and takes cues from critical organization and management studies (Dav-enport and Leitch, 2005; McGowan, 2003). It entails two crucial exercises: First, to explicitly seek out inconsistencies, contradictions, and 'silences' in people's

discourses and behaviours rather than discard them (Stel, 2019); and, second, to specifically explore such tensions and gaps in the data not as ‘measurement errors’ or ‘thin data,’ but as research findings in their own right that offer a relevant window onto the broader institutional context in which they are generated (Mazzei, 2003: 357). Rather than precluding understanding, silences and ambiguities in the data can convey important clues about the nature of governance and authority in the settings in which they were generated (Jaworski, 2005: 2; Pinder and Harlos, 2001: 333; Randazzo, 2015: 3; Zerubavel, 2006: 8). What is knowable, after all, is not decided on individually but ‘enculturated,’ negotiated socially and enforced politically (Poland and Pedersen, 1998: 298).

This approach harnesses work on ‘metadata’ (Fujii, 2010), unspoken thoughts or tacit understandings implicit in rumors, inventions, denials, evasions, and silences. It engages with the idea of ‘infrapolitics,’ ‘political action [that] is studiously designed to be anonymous or to disclaim its purpose’ (Scott, 1990: 199). Fundamentally, it asks: Who does (not) – or claims (not) to – know what and why is this so? Inspired by a rich literature dealing with fieldwork in ‘difficult’ settings, it reiterates that distilling ‘reliable’ data and ‘valid’ analyses is not simply a matter of deducing truthfulness or accuracy and distinguishing ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ but rather of systematically exploring what so-called lies and falsehoods communicate about social reality and political institutions (Carpi, 2015b: 2). More practically, it asks a specific set of questions from the data: What is not being said? (mobilizing work on gaps and silences); What is not being done? (addressing the matter of inaction); What is sensitive? (drawing on studies of taboo, evasion, and denial); What is taken for granted? (inspired by Bourdieu’s notion of ‘doxa’); and What is inconsistent? (pertaining to contextuality in terms of timing, setting, and audience)

As outlined in Olivier de Sardan’s (2016: 121) ‘anthropology of gaps, discrepancies and contradictions,’ such an approach demands qualitative, triangulated, and contextual data and iterative, critical, and reflexive analysis. It requires a study of policy practices rather than policies as such, of *de facto* behaviour and effects in addition to *de jure* stipulations. My analysis is based on elaborate desk research as well as extensive fieldwork. The Palestinian case-study draws on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two informal Palestinian refugee settlements in 2012, 2013, and 2014, during which observational notes were systematically generated; 40 informal meetings, five group interview sessions, and 232 individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted; and complementary documentary material was collected (Stel, 2017). The Syrian case-study makes use of two bodies of data. The first was collected during six months of long-distance data generation in 2017 and 2018 that produced 34 in-depth interviews and 18 informal discussions with national stakeholders. The second resulted from three months of fieldwork in early 2018<sup>15</sup> that revolved around the governance of two specific informal Syrian refugee settlements in the Bekaa Valley. This fieldwork entailed 35 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and various informal meetings with local stakeholders and the collection of relevant documents. In both

case-studies, these data were generated and reflected upon in close collaboration with local fieldwork partners.

My data mostly derives from interviews with political authorities and state representatives working nationally and locally, (self-proclaimed) political and communal refugee representatives, humanitarian ‘professionals,’ activists and representatives of ‘civil society,’ and a range of experts from academia, journalism, and think tanks.<sup>16</sup> This book, then, does not reflect a traditional street-level bureaucracy in that it offers only limited access to the internal understandings and individual deliberations of state officials.<sup>17</sup> Rather, by soliciting the reflections and experiences of political authorities and state representatives as well as their humanitarian ‘partners’ and the refugees they are supposed to govern, the book offers a multi-dimensional analysis that draws on not only the implicit or explicit considerations of decision-makers themselves, but also on reflections on their stated and unstated interests by a multitude of stakeholders.

Despite my aspirations for comprehensiveness, my research questions are necessarily bounded. Thus, in situating my analysis and argument, four important disclaimers with regard to demarcation are warranted. First, my analysis centres on ambiguity in the governance of refugees in host countries. The uncertainty produced by the process of displacement itself, well-documented in refugee studies, lies beyond the scope of my argument. Second, my interest specifically regards the role of political governance actors in the institutionalization of ambiguity. Although I focus on governance by the state, in the context of Lebanon’s hybrid political order that is introduced in Chapter 1, this comprises a much broader mediated assemblage that includes officially non-state political and ‘traditional’ authorities. Nevertheless, my analysis does not explicitly consider the role of the Lebanese public and civil society in shaping such governance. Similarly, I recognize that humanitarian agencies also routinely keep refugees in the dark about procedures and criteria, so as to prevent them from ‘gaming the system,’ and are heavily implicated in forms of ‘epistemic disorientation’ (Atme, 2019; Carpi, 2014, 2015a; Cullen Dunn, 2012; Ferguson, 1994; Schmidt, 2019; Tazzioli, 2019). Yet while this is apparent throughout the case-studies and while Chapter 6 discusses the complicity of the humanitarian sector in the broader governmentality that the politics of uncertainty denotes, the focus of this book is on strategic ambiguity in the political regime.

Third, not discarding the fundamental importance of such projects, my analysis here does not aim to ‘give voice’ to refugees in a direct way. My quest to interrogate the strategic dimensions of ambiguity started out with the lived experiences of refugee communities that hosted me during my initial fieldwork, who understood the uncertainty they faced as a disciplinary strategy. Yet, although these experiences are prevalent throughout my analysis, the primary focus of the book does not regard the coping mechanisms of refugees. Instead, inspired by political anthropology approaches to ‘study up’ (Nader, 1972), I depart from these perceived disciplinary effects of uncertainty and trace them through the governance arenas in which they originated (Hasselberg, 2016: 94). Going beyond the

experience of uncertainty to teasing out the politics of uncertainty contributes to validating refugees' implicit political understandings of institutional ambiguity and helps us to critically question our reading of the broader (dis)order that contributes to shaping their lives.

Fourth, I am acutely aware that my analysis and its implications can be read as first and foremost a critique on Lebanon's engagement with the refugees it hosts. This, as I further substantiate in the book's final chapter, would be a mistake. I recognize the enormous feat of hosting such a large number of refugees as Lebanon has faced, above all by the Lebanese population – of which the poorest segments welcomed the largest numbers of refugees – but also by many if not most state officials who do the best they can under extremely restraining circumstances. My analysis is certainly critical of particular practices and aspects of Lebanon's refugee governance. This perspective, however, should be carefully situated in the relevant geopolitical context. Problems in regional host states can never be understood in isolation from the political hegemony of Western policy actors in the global migration regime. Western states have contributed to causing or failed to prevent and solve the devastating conflicts that have produced the Palestinian and Syrian refugee crises. They condone and encourage the type of regional refugee governance that is the object of study in this book in their ruthless attempt to outsource migration management and safeguard their own countries from the predicaments they think hosting refugees entails. Clearly, governance of forced migration in the 'Global North' prefigures and parallels the maleficent inaction and ambiguity here explored for the Lebanese case (Stel, 2018).

Thus, while my argument, for instance, suggests that limited political will is as important as capacity deficits in explaining the informality, liminality, and exceptionalism that characterize refugee governance in Lebanon, this should not be taken to mean that Lebanon – or any other host country where institutional ambiguity is particularly significant – is entirely or even primarily responsible for the 'mess' it finds itself in.<sup>18</sup> The parameters that incentivize these modes of governance have geopolitical and (neo-)colonial drivers. Ultimately, as De Waal (2014) surmises: 'The agenda for poor and troubled countries is set by rich and powerful countries' and these 'are attuned principally to their own requirements of crisis management.' Such 'crisis management' by the Global North crucially encourages and props up the regional politics of uncertainty as explored in this book.

## Outline

The book departs from a two-fold argument. It suggests that, on the one hand, the twin notions of institutional ambiguity and the politics of uncertainty offer a fruitful new perspective on refugee governance in Lebanon and, on the other hand, that studying Lebanon's refugee governance from this perspective can critically enhance our understanding of the ways in which political authority operates in a more general sense. Chapter 1 has the dual aim to advance in further detail the notion of hybrid political order and the forms of arbitrary governance that flourish

within it, outlining the more contingent and structural roots of institutional ambiguity. It introduces the particulars of the sectarian, neopatrimonial, and oligopolistic incarnation of such hybridity in Lebanon.

This is followed by four empirical chapters engaging with the two case-studies central to the book, first discussing the national policy and local governance dimensions of Lebanon's response to the arrival of Syrian refugees, in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, and then analyzing the Lebanese engagement with the more protracted Palestinian refugee presence in the country, in Chapters 4 and 5, that has crucially affected the governance of Syrian refugees. In these chapters, I demonstrate how institutional ambiguity is evident in the governance of Syrian and Palestinian refugees' status, spaces, and representative institutions and how this manufactures refugees' vulnerability in these three realms and enables authorities to control, exploit, and render deportable refugees.

This outline follows from my structurationist take on the analysis of politics in which agency – someone's capacity to initiate change in her or his circumstances – and structure – the rules of social life – are mutually constituting entities. Whereas Chapter 1 introduces and analyzes the structures and context that induce ambiguity, the book's empirical chapters focus on the political actions that shape and reinforce it. Chapter 6 brings these perspectives together. It relates the analytical framework presented in this Introduction with the empirical insights mustered in the case-study chapters and extends the idea of the politics of uncertainty as introduced here by drawing on the emerging field of ignorance studies. It suggests we can further understand the strategic aspects of the inaction and ambiguous action that produce institutional ambiguity by exploring these as forms of feigned, maintained, and imposed 'not-knowing.' This allows for a stronger analytical linkage between means – institutional ambiguity – and ends – control, exploitation, and expulsion – in Lebanese refugee governance dynamics. It furthers a nuanced reading of the agency behind institutional ambiguity that stays far away from conspiracy theories of masterminded chaos without succumbing to systemic platitudes.

The book's concluding chapter extends the insights arrived at beyond the specifics of the empirical contexts studied. It explores what my case-studies have to say about practices and processes of power, order, and political authority more broadly. Speaking to the academic literatures underlying my framework in the fields of refugee studies, hybrid governance, and ignorance studies, it explicates the empirical and conceptual contributions and political implications of my analysis.

## Notes

- 1 Author's interview – Tyre, 7 May 2013.
- 2 Author's interview – Skype, 14 December 2017.
- 3 Author's interview – Skype, 16 March 2018.
- 4 Author's interview with international development manager – Skype, 19 December 2017.

- 5 An advisor to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, cited in Frangieh and Barjas (2016).
- 6 The book thereby synthesizes, revisits, and extends earlier work on the interface between institutional ambiguity and refugee governance in Lebanon published in Stel (2015, 2016, 2017) and Nassar and Stel (2019).
- 7 My understanding of policy implementation was greatly facilitated by a review by Meike Frotzheim.
- 8 Author's interview – Skype, 19 December 2017.
- 9 Statement of advisor to the Minister of State for Displaced Affairs, livestream of event at the American University of Beirut – 23 November 2017.
- 10 Author's informal discussion with project evaluation specialist – Skype, 21 August 2017.
- 11 I do not take the 'crisis' frame applied to the presence of refugees in the country by the Lebanese government for granted. When I refer to the Syrian or Palestinian refugee crises, I acknowledge but do not validate this dominant state discourse. Crisis denotes first and foremost the predicaments of refugees themselves.
- 12 This term previously appears in other work in different fields (Jones, 2014; Petersen, 1996; Power, 2004; Schedler, 2013), but my conceptualization here is distinct from these earlier applications empirically as well as politically.
- 13 The locus of fieldwork in the Palestinian case-study was located in South Lebanon and that of the Syrian case-study in the Bekaa. In both studies, however, local manifestations of institutional ambiguity were systematically linked to district/provincial and national governmentalities, which allows me to speak of an encompassing politics of uncertainty instead of isolated local incarnations of institutional ambiguity.
- 14 This raises the question as to which of the institutional ambiguity detected is on account of the refugee status of the governance subjects I focus on and which of it stems from the hybridity of the Lebanese governance setting central to my analysis. This issue is addressed throughout the book and further taken up in the concluding chapter. In a nutshell, I argue that the politics of uncertainty leveled against refugees in Lebanon is an extreme and particular version of the politics of uncertainty that Lebanese citizens face, which in turn reflects governance more broadly and helps shed new light on how deliberate forms of institutional ambiguity work as a governance modality more universally.
- 15 This part of the fieldwork was conducted by a fieldwork partner. This denied me the opportunity of field 'immersion' that I initially and ideally sought. The subsequent intense coordination with my fieldwork partner on the ground – who, having lived in the country for years and having professionally worked on refugee issues for a long time, did bring extensive immersion to the table – has added a layer of reflexivity to data generation and analysis that helped navigate the ever-present question of whether confusion and uncertainty simply reflect researcher ignorance or indeed signal institutional ambiguity (Gershon and Raj, 2000: 10).
- 16 Interviews conducted for the Palestinian case-study (in 2012, 2013, and 2014) were not recorded, and citations from these interviews throughout the book are thus based on notes. Interviews for the Syrian case-study (held in 2017 and 2018) were mostly recorded and, unless indicated otherwise, quotes from these conversations are verbatim.
- 17 See Kalir, Achermann, and Rosset (2019), Lindberg and Borrelli (2017), and Mencütek (2019:14) for further deliberations on physical and psychological access to state officials.
- 18 Here the distinction between rulers and ruled, artificial and problematic though it may be, is essential. An important asset of the idea of a politics of uncertainty is that it

allows to at least tentatively locate some of the agency behind pervasive institutional ambiguity. Yet, such responsibility can – in hybrid settings where accountability is convoluted – not be extended to the broader population of a particular country, even if these are nominal democracies and even if over time people become implicated in institutional ambiguity through their everyday negotiation of it.

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