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DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC BURDEN AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN JORDAN, LEBANON, AND TURKEY, 2010-2024

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, the Syrian civil war has displaced over 13 million individuals, with the majority of refugees being absorbed by neighboring states. This paper analyzes the varying influence of the Syrian refugee crisis on economic stability and political order in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey during the period 2010-24. Drawing on neo-institutional theory, it conceptualizes refugee inflows as external shocks whose impacts are mediated by pre-existing state capacity, governance quality, and economic structure. Employing a comparative interrupted time-series design and panel data from UNHCR, the World Bank, the IMF, and ACLED, the analysis identifies three distinct trajectories. Lebanon underwent exacerbated economic decline and political instability despite large amounts of per-capita humanitarian aid, which was indicative of poor institutional capacity and fiscal fragility. Jordan exhibited a pattern of managed strain in that weak institutional capacity and effective aid absorption helped in mitigating the impacts but did not eradicate fiscal and labor market pressures. Turkey absorbed the largest absolute number of refugees with comparatively modest macroeconomic disruption, reflecting greater economic scale and state capacity. Fixed-effects negative binomial regressions indicate that economic grievances, specifically unemployment and inflation rather than refugee density, predict political instability as expressed in protest events. The findings challenge displacement-burden models that assume uniform effects and support institutional quality and economic structure as the primary mediating factors in refugee-hosting outcomes. The paper contributes a theoretically grounded comparative framework with direct implications for equitable international burden-sharing mechanisms.

KEYWORDS: Syrian refugees; forced displacement; economic burden; political stability; institutional capacity; Jordan; Lebanon; Turkey; burden-sharing; neo-institutional theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in March 2011, generated one of the gravest humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. Over half of Syria's pre-war population has been forcibly displaced, with more than 6.2 million registered internationally and over 7.4 million internally displaced as of 2024 (Chughtai & Ali, 2024). The crisis is distinguished from prior large-scale displacement episodes by its exceptional duration, geographic concentration in neighboring host states, and the unprecedented international attention it has attracted. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey remain the primary destinations for registered Syrian refugees, and the demographic, economic, and political environments of all three countries have been fundamentally altered (Içduygu & Nimer, 2019; Zreik, 2024).

The clustering of Syrian refugees in these three Middle Eastern host countries has consequently generated intense scholarly and policy interest in the need to understand their varying impacts. Resource-scarce rentier monarchies, such as Jordan (which has received more than 1.3 million Syrians, or about 13% of the population, at its highest point), Lebanon (which has received more than 1.5 million), and Turkey (which has received more than 3.6 million refugees, the largest absolute number in the world, albeit constituting only 4.4% of the resident population), have all welcomed over 1.3 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The differences in contexts suggest a natural comparative structure of understanding the interaction of displacement burdens and prior state capacity, economic structures, and quality of institutions.

Although the impacts of Syrian refugees have been extensively researched, there are still three gaps within the literature. First, the majority of literature concentrates on individual nations or even on specific sectors (labor markets, fiscal systems, and public services) rather than offering comparative analysis of multiple burden dimensions (Verme & Schuettler, 2021). Second, temporal studies on crises in Lebanon and the Middle East, in general, can be characterized by the short post-crisis window, usually 2011-2019, which is constrained to capture long-term structural changes (Ali, 2023). This limited time frame fails to address the far-reaching systemic impacts of the post-2019 Lebanese financial crisis that has essentially redefined the economic, social, and regional dynamics of the country. As a result, short-term analyses tend to undervalue long-term impacts of concurrent economic, political, and humanitarian crises. Third, theoretical frameworks tend to be underdeveloped, and most studies employ ad hoc

analytical categories instead of theoretical approaches that are systematic and could be used to explain cross-national variation (Tsourapas, 2019).

This study addresses these gaps by asking the following: How and why have the economic and political costs of hosting Syrian refugees differed among Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey during the period 2010-2024? Three primary arguments are advanced. First, drawing on neo-institutional theory, host-country outcomes are substantially predetermined by pre-crisis state capacity and institutional quality rather than by refugee-to-population ratios alone. Second, the effectiveness of international aid is endogenous to the institutional setting, as aid stabilizes fiscal systems where functional institutions exist (Jordan) but fails to compensate for institutional dysfunction (Lebanon). Third, we demonstrate that political instability is mainly caused by economic grievances but not by the presence of refugees per se, which refutes the nativist accounts that social tensions are caused by the presence of refugees.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we have examined the literature on the issue of refugee hosting burdens and created our neo-institutional theoretical framework. Section 3 explains the comparative research design and methodology. Section 4 provides a presentation of empirical results on both economic and political fronts. Section 5 presents the discussion of theoretical implications and policy recommendations. The final section 6 presents the conclusion, limitations, and future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Economic Impacts of Forced Displacement

The economics of forced displacement have evolved beyond initial premises on homogeneous negative effects to more context-specific insights (Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2013; Betts et al., 2015). Contemporary literature recognizes three main channel points of transmission of the impacts of refugee inflows into the host economies: labor markets, public finance, and aggregate economic performance.

Effects on the labor market have been most empirically studied, and studies have explored the displacement of native workers, suppression of wages, and reallocation of sectors. Early theoretical work predicted wage depression and displacement of similarly skilled native workers following large refugee inflows (Borjas, 2003). Empirical results, however, have been mixed. Fallah et al. (2019) found that Syrian refugees reduced male employment in

Jordan's informal sector but had no significant wage effects.

In comparison, Ceritoglu et al. (2017) established that Syrian refugees in Turkey displaced natives in informal employment and raised formal-sector employment, which indicated the effects of labor market segmentation. According to Akgunduz et al. (2018), positive spillovers were also recorded where refugee-intensive areas in Turkey saw a greater number of firms entering and starting businesses, especially among Syrian business owners. These conflicting results highlight the importance of the fact that the impacts of labor markets crucially depend on the existing labor market institutions, formality rates, skill complementarities, and regulatory environments.

Public finance channels run on the basis of rising demand for public services (education, healthcare, water, and sanitation) and governmental spending to fulfill humanitarian responsibilities. Fiscal burden literature notes that expenses are concentrated in the short term, and future tax income only becomes reality over time as refugees get into formal work (Hennessey & Hagen-Zanker, 2020; Ruist, 2020; Schneiderheinze & Lucke, 2020). The Ministry of Planning in Jordan approximated that taking in Syrian refugees cost the government about \$2.5 billion per year (Malkawi, 2016), and the size of the public debt in Jordan has almost doubled between 2011, when the Syrian crisis started, and 2016 with a debt of \$35.2 billion (Luck, 2016). By 2018, the government of Lebanon estimated cumulative costs of more than \$18 billion (Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, 2019). Methodological decisions in the fiscal burden debate rely on whether accounting is done through the government perspective or social perspective: the former uses direct budgetary costs to estimate fiscal impacts, whereas the latter uses social accounting techniques that incorporate refugee consumption multipliers and labor contributions. As highlighted by several studies, fiscal impacts are mediated by previously existing budgetary constraints, the capacity to raise revenues, and international aid flows (Morrissey, 2015; Clemens et al., 2018; Gal, 2019).

Aggregate economic impacts on GDP growth, inflation, and trade balances are subject to theoretical ambiguity and are still a controversial subject empirically. According to standard growth models, the aggregate output should grow with the supply of labor at the expense of the per capita income given the same level of capital stocks and productivity levels (Koopman & Wacker, 2023). Nevertheless, because refugees demand, consume, and sometimes

even contribute to productive capacity, they have counterbalancing effects (Clemens & Hunt, 2019; Berbée et al., 2022). A study by Maystadt & Verwimp (2014) on Rwandan refugees in Tanzania found positive long-term growth outcomes in terms of agricultural productivity. In comparison, Alix-Garcia & Saah (2010) registered adverse impacts in Rwanda. To Syrian refugees, the impacts at the macro levels seem to be extremely heterogeneous: Lebanon reported severe economic contraction after the year 2011, yet it is analytically difficult to draw a line between refugee impacts and pre-existing macroeconomic vulnerabilities (Alamari, 2025). Jordan experienced slowed growth yet was positive, whereas Turkey maintained relatively strong growth despite having the largest number of refugees in the world (Tümen, 2023).

This empirical heterogeneity implies that context is a very important factor. However, in the majority of studies, context is not theoretical but rather residual. In their extensive review, Vermeer & Schuettler (2021) conclude that the economic impacts of forced displacement are very context-specific; no single effect exists, and more comparative studies are required to theorize contextual variation systematically.

2.2 Political Dimensions: From Economic Strain to Social Instability

The political science literature on the impact of refugees has centered on social cohesion, protest dynamics, and governance capacity. Contact theory hypothesizes that prejudice is minimized in conditions of equal status after sustained intergroup interaction (Allport, 1954), and group threat theory hypothesizes that negative attitudes are heightened by status competition (Quillian, 1995). Syrian refugee studies have presented evidence in favor of threat-based mechanisms. The results of quantitative surveys in Jordan show that Jordanians in regions with a high number of refugees are more anxious about the economy, feel more job competition, and have more negative attitudes toward Syrians (Ali & Al Ganideh, 2020; Alrababa'h et al., 2020; 2021). Similarly, Getmansky et al. (2018) discovered that Turkish nationals living in provinces with relatively more refugees demonstrated higher support of restrictive policies and anti-refugee parties. Nevertheless, attitudinal effects have not mechanistically translated into widespread violence (Fabbe et al., 2019).

Studies on political stability examine the potential of the presence of refugees to increase the level of protest, civil unrest, or regime fragility. Relevant

causal channels operate through resource competition, inequity in distribution of aid, and undermining state legitimacy when governments are seen to fail in addressing humanitarian matters (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). The uprisings in Lebanon that have been massively experienced since 2019 were spurred by economic downfall, political corruption, and failure in governance, and the inflow of refugees is merely one of many factors contributing to it but not the main force (Fakhoury, 2017; Salloukh, 2019). Governance and state capacity approaches further emphasize that strong states can absorb displacement shocks more effectively than fragile or fragmented states (Aksoy & Tümen, 2021; Janmyr, 2016).

2.3 International Aid and Burden-Sharing

The international refugee law and humanitarian principles establish the norms of burden-sharing, according to which the international community must assist countries with disproportionate refugee populations (Betts & Collier, 2017). The Syrian crisis sparked off unprecedented humanitarian funding, with the public debt of Jordan almost doubling from \$18.9 billion at the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011 to \$35.2 billion in 2016 (Luck, 2016). However, controversy exists over the effectiveness of the aid, conditionality, and equity in distribution.

The Jordan Compact (2016) is an example of novel forms of burden-sharing, which associates humanitarian assistance with development funding and trade preferences in exchange for Jordan giving Syrian refugees work permits and access to education (Barbelet et al., 2018). Early assessments proved positive, with the Compact being considered a framework or model for which refugee crises could be converted into development opportunities (Tsourapas, 2022). Early assessments were positive, but subsequent analyses identified significant implementation gaps: work permits remained difficult to obtain, job creation fell short of targets, and conditionality generated sovereignty concerns

(Lenner & Turner, 2024; Almasri, 2021).

In Lebanon, the massive humanitarian aid flows were not enough to save the situation in fiscal terms; most of it was, in fact, just temporary crisis management and not structural economic support, meeting the urgent humanitarian demand and letting the underlying governance and economic dysfunctions expand (World Bank, 2023; Ismail, 2025). The case of Lebanon provides an example of what we refer to as institutional absorption failure: once the governance systems cannot effectively channel, manage, and utilize external resources, aid fails to stabilize host-country systems in spite of the volume.

Initially, Turkey employed a more sovereigntist approach and has historically financed much of its spending on refugees and retained more policy control over registration, residency, and social services (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). It was not until 2016 that Turkey accepted significant EU funding (€6 billion) being provided in exchange for migration control commitments (International Rescue Committee 2023). Researchers argue whether Turkish self-reliance was a sign of strength in state capacity or a sign of the strategic exploitation of refugee presence as a geopolitical bargaining chip by Ankara in negotiations with Europe (Tsourapas, 2019). What remains evident is that the effectiveness of aid is not solely a matter of the amount of aid transfers but is anchored in the quality and absorptive capacity of institutions being assisted.

Table 1 presents a summary of current literature on the Syrian refugee crisis, and it reveals that previous studies are divided into those that survey labor markets, those that examine governance, and those that examine the situation in broad contexts. The majority of the research is country-specific and considers either economic or political consequences individually. This table sheds light on the lack of a comparative institutionally based analysis that collectively analyzes macroeconomic, fiscal, and political impacts across host states.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Literature on Syrian Refugee Crisis Impacts.

Author(s), Year	Country/Region	Key Variables	Methodology	Key Findings	Gap Addressed
Fallah et al. (2019)	Jordan	Employment, wages	Instrumental Variable	Negative impact on male informal employment; no significant wage effects	Lacks comparative and political dimensions
Ceritoglu et al. (2017)	Turkey	Employment, wages	Quasi-experimental (DiD)	Refugees displaced natives from informal jobs; increased formal employment	Single-country, labour market only
Fakhoury (2017)	Lebanon	Governance, political stability	Qualitative case study	Weak state and sectarian politics produced ad hoc, ineffective refugee response	Lacks quantitative econometric testing
Verme & Schuettler (2021)	Global	Economic impacts	Literature review	Impacts are highly context-dependent; no universal effect	Calls for comparative studies

Tsourapas (2019)	Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey	Foreign policy, refugee management	Comparative qualitative	Host states use refugee populations as foreign policy leverage	Does not quantify economic or political burdens
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2.4 Theoretical Framework: A Neo-Institutional Approach to Burden Variation

Existing literature lacks a systematic theoretical account of why refugee burdens vary across host countries. This study addresses this gap by developing a neo-institutional framework in which state capacity and institutional quality are the primary explanatory variables conditioning the impacts of displacement.

Neo-institutional theory in comparative politics emphasizes that formal institutions, such as government structures, rule of law, and bureaucratic capacity, as well as informal institutions, such as norms, political culture, and clientelistic networks, shape policy outcomes even in the absence of abundant economic resources or in the face of external shocks (Hall & Taylor, 1996; North, 1990). Applied to refugee hosting, this perspective implies that countries with well-functioning, cohesive institutions can manage displacement more effectively than those with weak or fragmented institutional environments, even when controlling for refugee numbers or per-capita income.

This study theorizes refugee-hosting burdens as exogenous shocks that interact with endogenous institutional backgrounds to generate divergent impacts. In particular, we theorize three institutional dimensions mediating burden impacts:

- **State capacity:** The capacity of the government to mobilize resources, enact policies, coordinate stakeholders, and provide services to the people (Mann, 1984). High-capacity states are able to quickly expand service delivery, impose rules, and keep order in the populace during emergencies. Meanwhile, low-capacity states have difficulty in coordinating and providing basic services, hence overloading the system.
- **Governance quality:** The effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy of political institutions, such as the rule of law, control of

corruption, and political stability (Kaufmann et al., 2011). Strong governance enables clear resource allocation and credible policy commitments, while weak governance generates corruption and policy inconsistency.

- **Economic structure:** Economic system size, level of diversification, level of formality, and dynamism and their effect on how the host communities absorb labor supply shocks caused by displacement. Diverse economies with significant sectoral labor allocation abilities and with diversified employment patterns are more likely to moderate the negative effects of refugee immigration, whereas more specialized or narrowly structured economies experience greater strain (Kilic, 2025).

From this framework, we derive four core hypotheses:

- H1 (Economic Growth): Higher Syrian refugee density is associated with lower GDP per capita growth.
- H2 (Fiscal Strain): Syrian refugees' existence will lead to deteriorating fiscal balances and increasing public debt-to-GDP ratios.
- H3 (Aid Effectiveness): The stabilizing effect of international aid on fiscal balances is conditional on institutional absorption capacity.
- H4 (Political Stability): Political instability is measured by protest events, which is primarily driven by economic grievances such as unemployment and inflation, rather than refugee density per se.

Theoretical and empirical investigations of the political and economic effects interrelate simultaneously through certain hypotheses guiding the analysis to determine to what extent the variables interplay in the refugees' issue by scientific validity, as Tables 2 and 3 define the model specifications, and variable definitions and sources.

Table 2: Model Specifications Summary

Model Type	Description	Purpose	Key Assumption(s)
Comparative Event Study	Visual and descriptive comparison of pre- and post-2011 trends across the three countries using time-series graphs.	To identify and compare the divergent trajectories of key economic indicators following the refugee shock.	The 2011 event marks a significant structural break.
Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL)	Analysis of country-specific short-run and long-run dynamic relationships between variables.	To provide granular statistical evidence of the in-country economic impacts of the refugee influx.	Variables can be I(0) or I(1). Existence of a long-run relationship (cointegration).

Fixed-Effects Negative Binomial	Regression model for count data within a panel structure.	To test the hypothesis that economic grievances, rather than refugee presence, drive political protests.	The conditional mean is an exponential function of the predictors; variance is a quadratic function of the mean.
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Table 3: Variable Definitions and Data Sources

Variable Name	Definition	Unit	Data Source(s)
refugee_density_per_1000	Registered refugees per 1,000 host population	Ratio	UNHCR, World Bank
gdp_growth_pct	Annual percentage growth rate of GDP	Percent	World Bank, IMF
unemployment_rate_pct	Unemployment rate (ILO definition)	Percent	ILO, World Bank
inflation_cpi_pct	Annual change in Consumer Price Index	Percent	World Bank, IMF
public_debt_gdp_pct	Gross public debt as a percentage of GDP	Percent	IMF, World Bank
fiscal_balance_gdp_pct	Government budget balance as a percentage of GDP	Percent	IMF, World Bank
protests_count	Annual count of protest events	Count	ACLED
aid_per_capita_usd	Net ODA received per capita	Current USD	OECD, World Bank
population_millions	Total mid-year population	Millions	World Bank
exports_gdp_pct	Exports of goods and services as % of GDP	Percent	World Bank
tourism_arrivals_millions	International tourism arrivals	Millions	World Bank

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a chronological, sequential, and descriptive approach based on a multistage methodology. The descriptive analysis comprises the economic and political baseline of the refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. This is followed by a comparative economic analysis of host-country burden trajectories. The third stage employs a combination of comparative event study and Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) modeling to examine dynamic economic relationships. The fourth stage conducts a political burden analysis using regression methods to examine the drivers of protest activity, as shown in Figure 1.

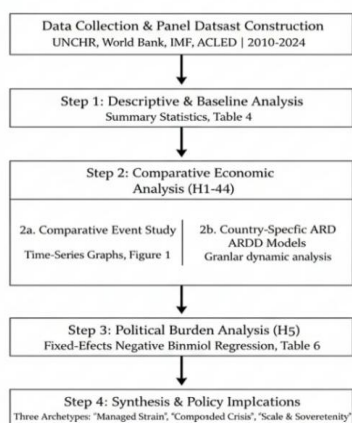


Figure 1: Research Design

3.2 Comparative Case Selection and Justification

This study applies a most-similar systems design (Lijphart, 1975; Mill, 1843) to compare three Middle Eastern states that share key background conditions but vary systematically on the theoretically critical dimensions. All three countries are (a)

geographically proximate to Syria; (b) non-Western, middle-income nations; (c) non-democratic or hybrid regimes; (d) signatories to international humanitarian norms though not the 1951 Refugee Convention; and (e) culturally and linguistically connected to Syria. These shared characteristics help control for regional and cultural confounders.

The three cases differ systematically on the key theoretical variables, as shown below. Rankings are derived from World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) Government Effectiveness and Political Stability scores, World Bank GDP data, and UNHCR refugee density estimates. The symbol '>' denotes 'greater than,' '>>' denotes 'substantially greater than,' and '≈' denotes 'approximately equal to':

- **State capacity:** Turkey > Jordan > Lebanon (based on WGI Government Effectiveness scores, where Turkey and Jordan score significantly higher than Lebanon, which ranks in the lowest quintile globally)
- **Governance quality:** Jordan ≈ Turkey > Lebanon (based on WGI Rule of Law and Control of Corruption scores; Jordan and Turkey perform comparably, both substantially above Lebanon)
- **Economic scale:** Turkey >> Lebanon > Jordan (based on nominal GDP from World Bank WDI; Turkey's economy is an order of magnitude larger than those of Jordan and Lebanon)
- **Pre-crisis political stability:** Jordan > Turkey > Lebanon (based on WGI Political Stability and Absence of Violence scores in the pre-2011 baseline period)
- **Refugee-to-population ratio:** Lebanon > Jordan > Turkey (based on UNHCR registered refugee counts divided by host-country population; Lebanon's ratio significantly exceeds that of both Jordan and Turkey)

This cross-case variation enables the analysis to isolate institutional and structural effects while holding regional context constant, in line with the logic of difference identified by Mill (1843): when initial conditions are similar and outcomes diverge, the explanation must lie in the dimensions along which cases differ.

3.3 Data Sources and Variable Construction

This study compiles a pooled country-year panel covering 2010–2024 ($T = 15$) for three host countries ($N = 3$). The data are mainly employed in a descriptive analysis, country-specific time-series estimation, and exploratory panel analysis of political outcomes and not in large- N panel inference. The data on registered Syrian refugees on an annual basis are received through UNHCR Refugee Data Finder (UNHCR, 2024). To measure the relative demographic burden of displacement, we construct a population-adjusted indicator, refugee density per 1,000 inhabitants, using the following formula:

$$\text{refugee_density}_{it} = \frac{\text{registered Syrian refug}}{\text{national population}}$$

The World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) and IMF World Economic Outlook (WEO) databases are the sources of economic variables. The data of net official development assistance (ODA) are obtained from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and converted to per-capita figures to enable cross-country comparison. The data of conflicts and protests are obtained from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which provides georeferenced, time-stamped protest events, riots, and demonstrations (Raleigh et al., 2010).

3.4 Analytical Strategy

Given the small- N , crisis-driven nature of the research question, the analysis adopts a multistage strategy combining descriptive visualisation, country-specific time-series modelling, and exploratory panel regression.

In Stage 1, the comparison of the interrupted time-series (ITS) is applied to investigate the trends of

major economic variables, i.e., GDP growth, unemployment, fiscal balance, and public debt across the entire period of 2010–24. The 2011 start of the crisis in Syria is indicated by a vertical reference line. This phase marks the temporal trends and cross-country differences without stating the causal recognition (Bernal et al., 2017).

In Stage 2, country-specific ARDL models are estimated for both Jordan and Turkey, where the quality of the data can be inferred using the time-series. Lebanon does not pass this phase based on the post-2019 data unreliability. ARDL specifications have support of mixed integration orders ($I[0]/I[1]$) and they can be used to estimate both short-run dynamics and long-run equilibrium relationships concurrently (Pesaran et al., 2001). Serial correlation, heteroskedasticity and parameter stability (CUSUM) diagnostic tests are utilized.

A fixed-effects negative binomial regression model is estimated in Stage 3 on the pooled data by country-year in order to analyze the drivers of protest activity. This specification is applicable when the count data is over dispersed, and takes advantage of within-country time variation and adjusts against time-invariant country characteristics. Findings are viewed as indicative rather than conclusive due to the limited number of countries. The robustness checks consist of Poisson model alternatives, different lag structures, and omission of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 era.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1 Descriptive Patterns: Divergent Baseline Conditions and Crisis Exposure

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics which reveal significant cross-national differences in refugee exposure and economic-political baselines. Lebanon experienced the highest relative refugee burden (mean density of 157.1 per 1,000 population versus 55.3 in Jordan and 18.5 in Turkey) but had the worst economic fundamentals: negative mean GDP growth (-2.15%) and extremely high levels of public debt (168.6% of GDP). These figures are indicative of the underlying economic weaknesses and government failures present in Lebanon.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, 2010–2024

Variable	Country	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Refugee density (per 1,000)	Jordan	55.31	28.47	1.53	88.08
	Lebanon	157.11	82.74	1.17	235.36
	Turkey	18.49	17.21	0.14	44.18
GDP growth (%)	Jordan	2.69	1.69	-0.52	6.38
	Lebanon	-2.15	8.80	-22.09	7.77
	Turkey	4.71	2.50	1.95	8.90

Unemployment rate (%)	Jordan	13.98	1.25	11.74	16.13
	Lebanon	12.83	3.73	4.80	16.63
	Turkey	9.76	1.48	7.64	12.24
Public debt (% of GDP)	Jordan	78.47	5.86	69.3	88.2
	Lebanon	168.60	32.25	130.9	213.1
	Turkey	45.19	5.82	35.9	54.3
Protest events (annual count)	Jordan	2,746	1,579	142	4,501
	Lebanon	7,226	4,511	204	11,976
	Turkey	1,560	808	168	2,470

Note: Values represent means across the 2010–2024 period. Data sources: World Bank WDI, IMF WEO, UNHCR, OECD DAC, ACLED.

By contrast, Turkey had positive growth (mean: 4.71%) and moderate levels of public debt (around 45% of GDP), although it has the largest absolute number of refugees. Jordan occupied the middle position with positive yet negligible growth (2.69%), high unemployment (13.98%), and increasing debt (78.5% of GDP). Such baseline disparities are critically determinant of crisis response and results, which substantiates the argument of neo-institutionalism that pre-existing capacity predetermines the allocation of refugee-related burdens.

International aid trends also differed significantly: Jordan obtained the largest per capita aid (mean: \$234.5), and Lebanon obtained the largest aid in absolute terms (mean: \$187.3) despite the extreme density of refugees, whereas Turkey obtained the lowest per capita assistance (mean: \$12.4), as per its

largely self-funded response to refugees.

4.2 Economic Burdens: Interrupted Time-Series Evidence

Figure 2 presents comparative time-series plots for four key economic indicators from 2010 to 2024, with the 2011 Syrian crisis onset marked by a vertical dashed line. The panels show how the fiscal balance (% GDP), unemployment rate, public debt (% GDP), and GDP growth have changed in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The Syrian crisis started in 2011, as shown by the vertical dashed line. Data was collected from the World Bank and the IMF by the authors. The visual evidence strongly supports H1, revealing divergent post-crisis trajectories explained by pre-existing institutional and economic conditions rather than refugee numbers alone.

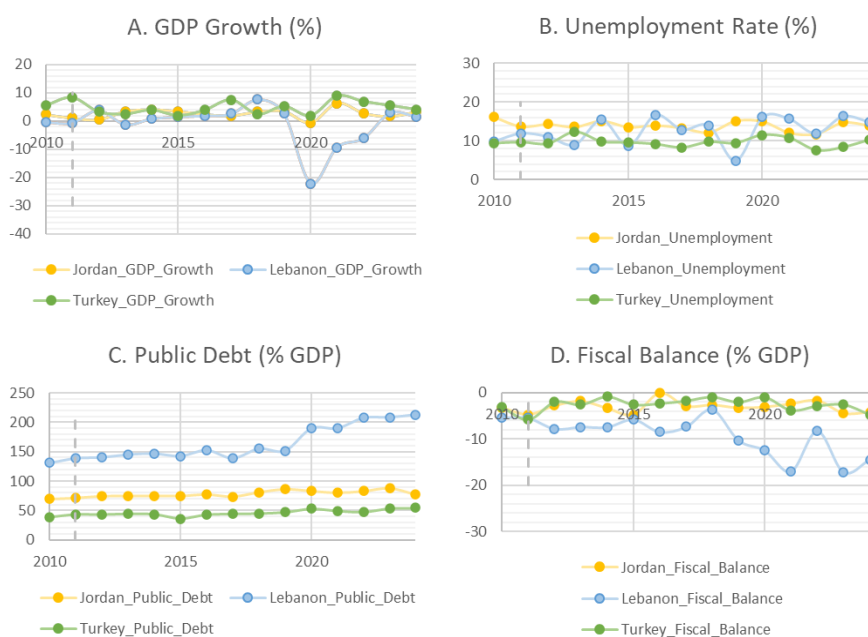


Figure 2: Comparative Economic Indicators, 2010–2024

Panel A: GDP Growth; Panel B: Unemployment Rate; Panel C: Public Debt; Panel D: Fiscal Balance. Data: World Bank WDI and IMF WEO.

Before the crisis in Syria (2010–2011), there was positive growth in the GDP of all three countries,

with Turkey performing the best (Panel A). Between 2012 and 2019, Turkey maintained a relatively strong

but fluctuating growth, whereas Jordan recorded lower but steady growth. This period was associated with growing stagnation in Lebanon. This divergence was the most significant after 2019: Lebanon had experienced a disastrous economic meltdown, whereas Jordan and Turkey had undergone a slight recession with partial recoveries. Unemployment trends (Panel B) indicate differences in structures: high unemployment in Jordan during the period was indicative of deep-rooted labour market constraints; in Turkey, fluctuations in

unemployment were within a smaller range, which is a sign of greater absorption capacity; in Lebanon, unemployment skyrocketed post-2019 in the face of the financial crisis. In Lebanon, public debt (Panel C) grew tremendously to above 200% of GDP post-2019 whereas in Jordan, the debt grew slowly and in Turkey, the debt levels were relatively low and stable. Fiscal deficits (Panel D) expanded across all three countries, but was severe and persistent in Lebanon.

Table 5: Summary of Economic Indicator Trajectories, 2010–2024

Indicator	Jordan	Lebanon	Turkey
GDP Growth	Low but stable post-2011; mild COVID-19 contraction with modest recovery	Severe stagnation post-2011; catastrophic collapse after 2019	Relatively strong and volatile; rapid post-2020 recovery
Unemployment	Persistently high; structural labour market constraints	Sharp rise after 2019 due to economic collapse	Moderate fluctuations; greater labour market absorption
Public Debt	Steady increase to high but manageable levels	Surpassed 200% of GDP after 2019	Low and stable; strong fiscal space
Fiscal Balance	Chronic but moderate deficits	Deep and unsustainable deficits	Smaller, more stable deficits
Economic Resilience	Moderate	Very low	High

4.3 Aid Flows and Institutional Absorption Capacity

To test H3, that aid effectiveness is conditioned on institutional quality, Figure 3 plots aid per capita against fiscal balance for Jordan and Lebanon between 2011 and 2024.

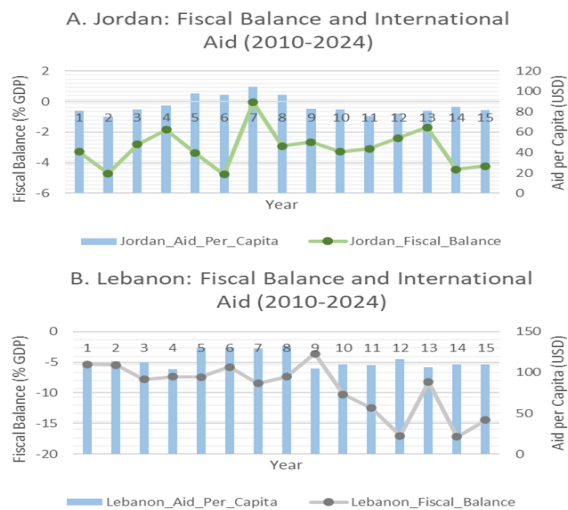


Figure 3: International Aid and Fiscal Balance in Jordan and Lebanon (2010–2024)

The fiscal balance in Jordan remained in deficit throughout the period, although temporary fiscal growth coincided with an increase in international aid per capita, especially after the Jordan Compact in 2016, indicating that foreign aid served as a buffer against the budgetary impacts of the inflows of refugees. While fiscal self-sufficiency was not achieved and deficits widened again after 2020,

Jordan’s relatively functional state apparatus allowed it to coordinate, administer, and allocate aid resources within its public finance framework. Lebanon presents a starkly different picture. Despite increasing aid per capita, fiscal deficits continued to deteriorate, reaching catastrophic proportions after 2019. The disconnect between rising external support and worsening fiscal performance is indicative of institutional absorption failure: poor governance, macroeconomic dysfunction, and state fragmentation prevented aid from being channeled into effective stabilization measures. These contrasting trajectories support H3 and reinforce the argument that the same volume of external resources produces markedly different outcomes depending on the institutional context of the recipient.

4.4 Political Instability: Economic Grievances over Refugee Presence

Table 6 presents fixed-effects negative binomial regression results for political instability outcomes. Two model specifications are reported. Model (1) includes refugee density as the sole predictor alongside country and year fixed effects. Model (2) replaces refugee density with economic grievance variables: unemployment and inflation.

Table 6: Fixed-Effects Negative Binomial Regression (Dependent Variable: Protest Count)

VARIABLES	(1) Protest Count	(2) Protest Count
Refugee Density (per 1,000)	0.004 (0.003)	
Unemployment Rate (%)		0.189***

		(0.052)
Inflation (CPI, %)		0.025***
		(0.007)
Observations	45	45
Country Fixed Effects	YES	YES
Year Fixed Effects	YES	YES
Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

Model (1) shows that the coefficient on refugee density is positive yet insignificantly small, which indicates that it is not solely the presence of refugees that explains differences in protest activity across the three countries- Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The powerful and statistically significant predictors in Model (2) are unemployment and inflation. Elevated unemployment is associated with a substantial increase in protest incidence ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.01$), and rising consumer price inflation also exerts a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.025$, $p < 0.01$). These results are consistent with grievance-based theories of political mobilization, which position material insecurity and deteriorating living standards as the primary drivers of collective action (Gurr, 1970; Ponticelli & Voth, 2020).

It is worth noting that the insignificance of refugee density when economic variables are included implies that refugees do not directly cause political instability. Rather, protests are more closely associated with macroeconomic deterioration and failures of state performance. This aligns with the descriptive finding that Lebanon, though receiving comparable or greater international aid, had the highest protest activity, which was fueled by hyperinflation, unemployment, and fiscal collapse when Turkey, with its high absolute refugee population, had relatively low degrees of protest.

The findings thus confirm H4: the causes of political instability in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey can be better attributed to worsening economic circumstances and state performance than refugee presence per se. This trend is consistent with cross-national data indicating that protests are more closely linked with macroeconomic distress than with migration rates (Berman & Couttenier, 2015; Bruckner & Gruner, 2010).

4.4.1 Lebanon: Institutional Breakdown and a Compounded Crisis

Lebanon exemplifies of what this study terms a "compounded crisis", which is the convergence of a massive exogenous shock with deep pre-existing institutional fragility, and the resultant economic, fiscal, and political collapse. Even before the Syrian conflict, Lebanon was characterised by a chronically service-dependent economy, structural fiscal deficits,

and one of the world's highest public debt-to-GDP ratios (Fakhoury, 2017; Diwan et al., 2023). These vulnerabilities severely constrained the state's capacity to absorb a refugee shock of exceptional relative scale. The descriptive and regression results confirm a consistent pattern of negative GDP growth, accelerating inflation, and rising protest activity throughout the study period.

Despite the substantial international aid that Lebanon was receiving, the lack of governance, widespread of corruption, and the lack of unity in political power did not allow efficient allocation of resources. The case of Lebanon demonstrates that external funding cannot compensate for an absent institutional framework: without the capacity to translate transfers into macroeconomic stabilisation, aid functions as emergency relief rather than structural support (World Bank, 2013, 2017).

4.4.2 Jordan: Managed Strain under Institutional Constraint

Jordan represents a case of managed strain: an example of state that internalized a significant exogenous shock, channeled its institutional response, and received external assistance, yet remained without systemic breakdown, despite the continued economic pressures. Although the proportion of refugees to the population is the second-highest in the three cases, Jordan managed to have positive GDP growth, stay without hyperinflation, and fiscal implosion.

This relative stability was based upon two reinforcing factors. First is that the comparatively coherent bureaucratic institutions and administrative capacity of Jordan allowed the policy coordination and service delivery despite the fiscal pressure. Second, the entry of labour markets, concessional finance, and budgetary support in the context of foreign aid were interconnected with the aid effectiveness that occurred during the Jordan Compact (Almasri, 2021; Lenner & Turner, 2024). That said, rising public debt, and high structural unemployment, coupled with the increasing reliance on aid means that Jordan is only temporarily stable and long-term financial sustainability is not guaranteed

4.4.3 Turkey: Scale, State Capacity, and Sovereign Management

Turkey exemplifies how the economic scale and state sovereignty can mitigate displacement shocks. Although Turkey had the largest absolute population of Syrian refugees in the world, it was a relatively stable country in terms of macroeconomic and

political turmoil throughout the majority of the research. Its greater and more varied economic foundation, strong ability to collect revenues, and centralized state apparatus allowed self-financing the management of the expenditure on refugees in the early stage of the crisis, minimizing reliance on conditional foreign assistance (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016; Tumen, 2023).

While national-level protest activity shows no strong correlation with refugee density in the regression results, localised tensions in border provinces and urban labour markets indicate distributional impacts that are masked in aggregate data (Del Carpio & Wagner, 2015). Turkey's experience nonetheless reinforces the central argument: institutional capacity and economic scale are the critical conditions under which refugee burden translates, or fails to translate into political and economic instability.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Institutional Quality as Mediator: Cross-Cutting Patterns

Three cross-cutting patterns emerge from the comparative analysis and support the neo-institutional framework developed in Section 2.4. First, refugee density alone explains limited cross-national variation in economic and political outcomes. Lebanon recorded the most severe deterioration under the highest relative refugee burden, while Turkey maintained macroeconomic stability despite the largest absolute number of refugees, and Jordan occupied a middle position. This non-linear pattern confirms that state capacity and governance quality mediate crisis impacts more strongly than demographic exposure alone.

Second, international aid is only effective where institutional absorptive capacity exists. The fact that Jordan had a comparatively functional state apparatus meant that aid inflows were able to partially mitigate fiscal decline, while the institutional crisis in Lebanon placed aid efficacy under severe pressure irrespective of large transfer volumes. The largely self-funded model that Turkey has adopted does not indicate the lack of aid but rather a deliberate policy choice enabled by greater fiscal capacity.

Third, political instability is associated with economic grievances but not with the presence of refugees. The fixed-effects regressions demonstrate that unemployment and inflation are significant predictors of protest incidence, whereas refugee density carries no significant independent effect. This challenges securitized discourses that attribute social

unrest to refugee inflows and instead points to macroeconomic governance as the primary determinant of political contestation.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The findings make three theoretical contributions. First, they extend neo-institutional theory to the forced displacement field, and demonstrate empirically that institutional mediation, rather than demographic pressure is the key factor determining the consequences of the refugee shocks into divergent host-country responses. This undermines deterministic burden-sharing models which assume that refugee numbers are the main explicatory factor (Verme & Schuettler, 2021; Bahar et al., 2021).

Second, the study refines the current knowledge on aid effectiveness in humanitarian contexts by demonstrating that absorptive capacity is a matter of endogenous institutional quality. This confirms criticism of donor policy that focuses on transfer volumes over governance conditions, and advocates aid systems that invest in state capacity instead of assuming it as a pre-existing background situation (Morrissey, 2015; Ismail, 2025).

Third, the study empirically substantiates grievance-based theories of political mobilization, which contradict approaches that directly relate migration to political instability. The evidence from Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey suggests that the political consequences of refugee hosting are mediated through economic performance, specifically unemployment and inflation rather than operating as a direct demographic effect (Gurr, 1970; Salloukh, 2019).

5.3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings carry direct implications for international refugee governance. Four policy recommendations follow from the analysis. First, burden-sharing mechanisms should be distinguished by institutional capacity, rather than by the number of refugees alone. Existing humanitarian funding systems frequently allocate resources based on population metrics, with insufficient attention to host-country governance and absorptive capacity. A more effective approach would incorporate measures of state capacity, fiscal health, and governance quality alongside refugee population data, ensuring that support reaches countries equipped to deploy it effectively.

Second, international engagement should prioritize prevention over post-collapse response. The fiscal decline and governance fragmentation in Lebanon had been observed years prior to the 2019 financial

collapse. Yet, international engagement remained largely reactive. Earlier investment in macroeconomic stabilization and institutional reform would likely have been less costly and less socially disruptive than the emergency response required after systemic failure.

Third, there is a need to integrate humanitarian aid with development and macroeconomic support in a systematic manner. The Jordan Compact, with its implementation gaps shows that the coordinated humanitarian, development, and trade-facilitation instruments can improve the outcomes of the refugee management. Future burden-sharing frameworks should institutionalize such coordination from the outset of displacement crises, rather than treating humanitarian and development financing as separate streams.

Fourth, it is crucial to address displacement at source. The persistent refugee strains on host states cannot be resolved through hosting arrangements in the long run. There is a need to implement diplomatic initiatives and post-conflict reconstruction efforts to address the situation in Syria, ensuring that the host states do not experience the long-term impact of the crisis and offering durable solutions for displaced communities.

6. CONCLUSION

This study opened with three core arguments: that host-country outcomes are substantially determined by pre-crisis institutional quality rather than refugee-to-population ratios; that the effectiveness of international aid is endogenous to institutional absorptive capacity; and that political instability is driven by economic grievances rather than by the presence of refugees per se. The empirical analysis across Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey between 2010 and 2024 provides consistent support for all three.

Lebanon experienced a compounded crisis in which a high relative refugee burden interacted with institutional weakness, fiscal mismanagement, and poor governance to produce economic collapse and escalating political instability. Jordan demonstrated managed strain, where moderate institutional

capacity and targeted international assistance mitigated, though did not eliminate, fiscal and labour-market pressures. As the country with the largest absolute refugee population, Turkey absorbed the shock with relative macroeconomic stability, which is indicative of a larger economy, a higher capacity to operate, and preference towards sovereign financing.

The central finding, that the mediating role of institutional quality is more powerful in crisis influence than demographic exposure challenges deterministic accounts of refugee burden and the policy structures built on them. Burden-sharing mechanisms, which are solely based on the number of refugees, lack the institutional circumstances under which external shocks are converted into crises. The fixed-effects regression results further confirm that protests in all three countries were more closely associated with unemployment and inflation than with refugee density, reinforcing the importance of macroeconomic governance as a stabilizing force.

Several limitations are taken into consideration. The small number of cases limits the ability to generalize beyond the Middle East. Data at the national level obscures significant levels of subnational heterogeneity, especially where the concentration of refugees is high. The scarcity of data made formal modeling of aid-institutional quality interaction effects unfeasible. Future studies should extend this framework to other scenarios of displacement, employ subnational designs, and examine the impacts of micro-level welfare on the host and refugee populations.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the analysis reveals that burden of hosting refugees is not an inevitable consequence of displacement but rather a product of the institutional, economic and political climate of the host country. International burden-sharing mechanisms should cease to adopt population-based formulas and adopt differentiated and capacity-sensitive support frameworks that help both humanitarian and development aspirations meet their cause and effect.

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