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Abstract

This article revisits the notion of “unfree labour” through the study of displaced Syrians working informally in Middle Eastern agriculture, drawing on interviews with Syrian agricultural workers and their intermediaries in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. By taking a political economy perspective, we argue that the International Labour Organization’s definition of “forced labour” does not capture Syrians’ experience of “unfreedom”, born out of the interplay between restrictive asylum policies in Middle Eastern host countries and globalised food systems requiring cheap, mobile labour. Our ethnographic approach also reveals that Syrian refugees are recruited into global supply chains through kinship networks.

Keywords: Displacement, agriculture, supply chains, kinship, global capitalism

This article revisits the notion of “unfree labour” through a comparative ethnographic study of refugees in Middle Eastern agriculture during the COVID-19 pandemic. We present an in-depth analysis of some of the findings from the 2020/21 *Refugee Labour under Lockdown* project, for which we conducted remote ethnographic interviews with Syrian agricultural workers, labour intermediaries, and employers in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and northern Syria—four countries where huge numbers of displaced Syrians have joined largely informal agricultural workforces. In our situation analysis report, we discussed how COVID-19 related movement restrictions and economic knock-on effects affected working conditions for displaced Syrian agricultural workers throughout the Middle East.¹ We found that the pandemic did not only cause disruptions, but also entrenched problematic continuities. Despite widespread movement restrictions, agricultural labour continued for most displaced Syrians across the region, with only 13% losing their jobs permanently in 2020. At the same time, greater job insecurity, reduced working hours, and the absence of protective measures worsened precarious working conditions for Syrian households, who had entered the pandemic with no financial safety net. In the present article, we zoom in on two follow-up questions: Why does work in agriculture remain many Syrians refugees’ only option during the pandemic? What causes the “unfreedom” that these refugees experience in agriculture?

Conflict and forced migration are well-known drivers of modern slavery, but contextual factors such as rule of law, migration patterns, and access to decent labour and livelihoods also

¹ Ann-Christin Zuntz, Mackenzie Klema, Lisa Boden, Sinem Sefa Akay, Bürge Akbulut, Ertan Karabiyik, Shaher Abdullateef, Esraa Almashhor, and Salim Faisal Alnabolsi, *Precarious Labour under Lockdown. Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Displaced Syrian Agricultural Workers in the Middle East. Situation Analysis Report* (Ankara: One Health FIELD Network, Development Workshop and Syrian Academic Expertise, 2021).

mitigate displaced people's vulnerability to modern slavery.² In recent years, humanitarian practitioners have deplored the lack of tailored tools to identify different forms of modern slavery as protection issues in the early stages of emergency responses.³ Features that complicate their detection in humanitarian settings are the absence of baseline data, inadequate legislation or poor law enforcement, the lack of monitoring, and a perception that such concerns can be dealt with later by development actors. In addition, displaced people may experience multiple forms of vulnerability, only some of which are recognised and addressed by humanitarians.⁴ This oversight became an acute concern during the Syrian crisis: armed parties such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have used enslavement as a tactic of power and to generate resources⁵, while refugees in neighbouring countries have experienced forced and child labour, and forced marriage.⁶ In this article, we attend to one form of refugee labour rarely discussed in terms of modern slavery: Syrians working in Middle Eastern agriculture. We argue that introducing an anti-slavery analysis into the study of forced migration deserves a historically situated political economy approach: instead of treating refugee flows as a series of disconnected emergencies, we study them in the context of global capitalism.⁷ We situate Syrian refugee labour at the intersection of shifting humanitarian paradigms, refugees' structural marginalisation in host countries, and the broader use of temporariness in governing migrants in countries that value them as "workers", but not as "citizens".

The Syrian crisis has led to profound changes in the humanitarian response: the hardening of the European Union's borders, and the promotion of refugee self-reliance as a means for improving Syrian livelihoods in the Middle East.⁸ Most of Syria's 6.6 million refugees have remained in Middle Eastern countries which are either not signatories to the 1951

² International Labour Organization, *Employment and decent work in refugee and other forced displacement contexts* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2020); William Avis, *Key Drivers of Modern Slavery* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2020); Viktoria Curbelo, "Exploring the Relationship Between Humanitarian Emergencies and Human Trafficking: A Narrative Review," *Journal of Modern Slavery* 6, no.3 (2021): 7-18.

³ Laura Lungarotti, Sarah Craggs and Agnes Tillinac, "Human trafficking in crises: a neglected protection concern," *Humanitarian Exchange* 65 (2015): 7-9.

⁴ International Organization for Migration, *Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of Crisis* (Geneva: IOM, 2015).

⁵ Nadia Al-Dayel and Andrew Mumford, "ISIS and Their Use of Slavery," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, January 27, 2020, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://icct.nl/publication/isis-and-their-use-of-slavery/>

⁶ Freedom Fund, *Struggling to survive: Slavery and exploitation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon* (London: Freedom Fund, 2016); United Nations General Assembly, "Trafficking in persons, especially women and children (A/71/303)," reliefweb, August 5, 2016, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/trafficking-persons-especially-women-and-children-a71303-enar>

⁷ Stephen Castles, "Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation," *Sociology* 37, no.1 (2003): 13-34.

⁸ Jeff Crisp, "The Syrian Emergency: A Catalyst for Change in the International Refugee Regime," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no.2 (2021): 1441-1453.

Convention on Refugees (Jordan, Lebanon) or do not recognize Syrians as “refugees” (Turkey).⁹ In Lebanon, the proliferation of bureaucratic categories used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the host state causes many Syrian refugees to be treated as economic migrants, rather than as vulnerable people in need of protection.¹⁰ In Turkey, the “temporary protection” status afforded to Syrians allows them to access some social services, while restricting their freedom of movement and labour rights.¹¹ In a major paradigm shift, the 2016 Jordan Compact granted Syrian refugees in Jordan 200,000 work permits in exchange for advantageous loans and easier access to EU markets.¹² However, only 122,000 permits were issued to Syrian workers between 2016 and 2019.¹³ Bureaucratic red tape, domestic labour market dynamics, and Syrians' own survival strategies have all limited the success of the scheme.¹⁴ In Jordanian agriculture, Syrian work permit holders still do not benefit from occupational health and safety protections or social security. Inspections of agricultural sites are infrequent, and labour inspectors check refugees' permits, but not the working conditions.¹⁵ Hence, scholars like Jennifer Gordon demand that “the right for refugees *to work* must be accompanied by rights *at work*”.¹⁶ Noting the parallels between exploitative refugee and migrant labour, Forced Migration Studies scholars have challenged the distinction between these two categories.¹⁷ Many refugee-hosting countries strategically employ legal ambiguity to avoid

⁹ Catherine Bellamy, Simone Haysom, Caitlin Wake, and Veronique Barbelet, *The Lives and Livelihoods of Syrian Refugees* (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2017).

¹⁰ Maya Janmyr and Lama Mourad, “Modes of Ordering: Labelling, Classification and Categorization in Lebanon's Refugee Response,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31, no. 4 (2018): 544–565.

¹¹ Feyzi Babana, Suzan Ilcan and Kim Rygielc, “Syrian refugees in Turkey: pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no.1 (2018): 41–57.

¹² Veronique Barbelet, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, and Dina Mansour-Ille, *The Jordan Compact: lessons learnt and implications for future refugee compacts* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2018).

¹³ Regional Refugee Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis, “Regional Strategic Overview 2019/2020,” 3RP, accessed 17 February, 2022, https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2019_2020.pdf

¹⁴ Katharina Lenner and Lewis Turner, “Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labor Market in Jordan,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no.1 (2019): 65–95.

¹⁵ Maha Kattaa, Meredith Byrne, and Alaa Al-Arabi, *Decent work and the agriculture sector in Jordan: Evidence from workers' and employers' surveys* (Beirut: ILO Regional Office for Arab States, 2018).

¹⁶ Jennifer Gordon, *Refugees and decent work: Lessons learned from recent refugee jobs compacts* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2018), 4.

¹⁷ Catherine L. Besteman, “Militarized Global Apartheid,” *Current Anthropology* 60, S19 (2019): S26–S38; Ali Bhagat, “Governing Refugee Disposability: Neoliberalism and Survival in Nairobi,” *New Political Economy* 25, no.3 (2020): 439–452; Prem Kumar Rajaram, “Refugees as Surplus Population: Race, Migration and Capitalist Value Regimes,” *New Political Economy* 23, no.5 (2018): 627–639.

refugees' more long-term integration¹⁸ - but refugees' combined experience of legal ambiguity and labour exploitation is surprisingly similar to that of labour migrants around the world.¹⁹ Temporary status, coupled with the threat of deportation, reduces the bargaining power of workers vis-à-vis employers, thus increasing their vulnerability to exploitative labour, debt relationships, and dependency on labour contractors.²⁰

This article builds on combined insights from Forced Migration and Modern Slavery Studies: it goes beyond a focus on conflict-induced displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic, to draw attention to wider processes of “migrantization” and “precarization” that compel Syrians to engage in exploitative labour *as refugees*.²¹ After introducing our research methods and sample, the article juxtaposes the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s definition of “forced labour”, and findings from the *Refugee Labour under Lockdown* project. The third section combines an ethnographic account of Syrian refugee labour at the start of agricultural supply chains, with a study of the social structures that make these economic relationships, and Syrians' particular brand of “unfreedom”, possible. Through focusing on *labour*, we expand our understanding of displacement, not only as a humanitarian crisis, but also as a process that generates precarious workforces.

1) Research methods

The 2020/21 *Refugee Labour under Lockdown* project, a Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre research project, was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. It brought together Edinburgh-based, Syrian, and Jordanian researchers from the One Health FIELD Network and the Syrian NGO Syrian Academic Expertise, with Turkish researchers from the not-for-profit cooperative Development Workshop. Between November 2020 and February 2021, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 80 Syrian displaced agricultural workers, together with 20 agricultural intermediaries and 20 employers, in four Middle Eastern countries. In this article, we focus on the perspective of Syrian workers and intermediaries. Participants were recruited through our Syrian and Turkish partners' professional connections to NGOs in the Middle East, and interviews were conducted via telephone and WhatsApp. In addition, we asked Syrian workers to document their working and living conditions during the pandemic through ethnographic “work diaries”, in which many shared

¹⁸ Nora Stel, “Uncertainty, exhaustion, and abandonment beyond South/North divides: Governing forced migration through strategic ambiguity,” *Political Geography* 88 (2021): 102391.

¹⁹ Nicholas De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002) :419–47; Rachel Parreñas et al., “Mechanisms of migrant exclusion: Temporary labour, precarious non-citizenship, and technologies of detention,” *Population Space and Place* 27(2021): e2488.

²⁰ David Cook-Martin, “Temp Nations? A Research Agenda on Migration, Temporariness, and Membership,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no.9 (2018): 1389-1403.

²¹ Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, *Tunisia as a revolutionized space of migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

videos and photos of their worksites, lunch breaks, fellow workers, and more via WhatsApp. All interviews with Syrian workers were conducted in Arabic by our Syrian and Jordanian colleagues. All respondents received compensation of the equivalent of £10 in their local currency for an interview, and an additional £10 for contributing an ethnographic work diary. Ethics approval for this study was received from the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.

Among the Syrian workers, 65% (52/80)²² of study participants were male; this gender bias is explained by the fact that we asked to talk to heads of households, who are usually male, even when women also engage in paid labour. Workers' age varied from 21 to 57, and most were in their mid-thirties. Most Syrians originally came from rural parts of Syria, and one third had only completed primary schooling. Prior to displacement, 63% (49/78) had been small-scale farmers, day labourers, or in some other capacity involved in agricultural production. In Lebanon and Jordan, 100% (40/40) of workers reported being registered with the UNHCR, compared to only 32% (6/20) in Turkey, where the Directorate General of Migration Management of the Turkish Government, rather than the UNHCR, is responsible for registering individuals under temporary protection. Overall, 42% (25/59) of Syrian workers outside of Syria reported having a valid permit to work in agriculture, with 65% (13/20) in Jordan, 50% (10/20) in Lebanon, and 11% (2/19) in Turkey. Differences between country-specific refugee-reception systems, resulting in different and complex experiences of documentation, are summarized in our Situation Analysis Report. De facto, having a work permit made no difference to our respondents' employment conditions: none of the workers had ever signed a formal contract with employers, or was eligible for paid sick leave. All 20 agricultural intermediaries in this study were male, with an average age of 44 years. In northern Syria and in Jordan, all intermediaries were Syrians; in Lebanon and in Turkey, we included three Syrian intermediaries and two local intermediaries. Like Syrian workers, intermediaries often had many years of experience working in agriculture. Of the 15 Syrian intermediaries outside Syria, 11 were themselves refugees. Intermediaries were not necessarily better off than workers; four of our interviewees were still doing manual labour alongside the displaced Syrians that they had recruited. Except for two Turkish intermediaries in Turkey, all intermediaries in this study only hired Syrian workers. Because of the small sample size and use of convenience sampling, our findings are not representative of all Syrian refugees working in Middle Eastern agriculture, let alone the wider displaced Syrian population in the region. However, they illustrate trends in how vulnerable people, such as Syrian refugees, eke out a living in legal limbo and increasingly globalised industries.

2) Displaced Syrians' "unfreedom"

In the *Refugee Labour under Lockdown* project, we sought to understand whether displaced Syrians' working conditions met the ILO's definition of "forced labour" as "all work

²² Because of the relatively high number of nonresponses to some questions, we provide in brackets the number of respondents who gave this specific answer, and the total number of respondents who answered the question.

or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily”.²³ To this purpose, we included a number of interview questions derived from ILO indicators of forced labour, including threats or actual physical harm, movement restrictions and confinement, debt bondage, withholding of wages, retention of identity documents, and denunciation of irregular workers to the authorities.²⁴ We found a more complex story: one in which Syrians did not have to be coerced into taking or retaining agricultural jobs, but instead struggled to find work in a volatile labour market with a surplus of workers, and thus were willing to accept badly paid, informal, and dangerous jobs. In our sample, all workers confirmed that their employers did not confiscate their identity documents, and 50% (39/78) reported that there would be no negative consequences if they left their jobs early. Except for three refugee households in Lebanon, no workers had actually received threats from their employers. (In an agricultural town in eastern Lebanon, a woman reported that an agricultural employer had first harassed her, and then stolen her phone and burnt down her tent. In Lebanon, this sadly was not an isolated incident: around the same time, in winter 2020, a fight between Syrian workers and Lebanese resulted in the torching of the tents of 75 Syrian families.²⁵) In our study, only two Syrian workers in Turkey felt unable to complain about poor working conditions because they did not have work permits. As leaving work did not entail punitive measures, workers voted with their feet: 36% of workers (28/78) said that they would abandon jobs if they did not like the conditions. A 52-year old female in Hatay province, Turkey, explained: “I don't complain to anyone. I leave work and approach a new intermediary. All we have is patience. We finish one day's work, and the second day we don't go to work”.

However, 22% (17/78) felt that leaving was not an option. A 42-year old Syrian man in northern Syria put it this way: “I accept the working conditions because work is our only source of income”. Economic necessity, not physical coercion, locked Syrians into exploitative labour: 17% (13/78) reported that they would be unable to find work elsewhere, and 8% (6/78) were afraid that they would not be paid if they left the fields early. Greater job insecurity tied Syrians to particular workplaces. By autumn 2020, 75% of workers (60/80) had lost their jobs temporarily, and 83% (66/80) found it more difficult to find jobs in agriculture, compared to before the pandemic. A 40-year old man in Hatay province, Turkey, explained his dilemma: “[I can complain] only to God, there is no-one, I cannot complain to the *shaweesh* [the intermediary] because he could replace me with someone else”. For agricultural workers, pandemic-related job

²³ ILO, “Forced Labour Convention,” International Labour Organization No 29 (1930), accessed February 17, 2022, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029; ILO, “What is forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking (Forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking),” International Labour Organization, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/definition/lang--en/index.htm>

²⁴ As summarized in Kendra Strauss, “Coerced, forced and unfree labour: Geographies of exploitation in contemporary labour markets,” *Geography Compass* 6, no.3 (2012): 137–148.

²⁵ Al Jazeera, “Lebanon arrests 8 as Syrian refugee camp set ablaze after fight,” Al Jazeera, December 27, 2021, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/27/syrian-refugee-camp-in-lebanon-set-ablaze-after-row>

losses were compounded by dwindling employment opportunities in winter. A 31-year old woman, also in Hatay province, described: “We depend on work in spring because we don't always find work in winter, and work is the only way we can make a living.”

Nevertheless, some aspects of refugees' situation come close to meeting ILO criteria on debt bondage and the withholding of wages. Employers and intermediaries could punish workers by withholding wages, for example for disagreements over the quality of work and working hours, or when employers ran out of money during the pandemic. A 21-year old female in Mersin, Turkey, complained: “Every ten days, I receive my wages, and if I stopped working, I might not receive my full wage, only when the season is over”. In our sample, 34% (27/79) of workers said that employers or intermediaries could withhold their wages, with higher numbers for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (53%, 10/19). The practice of advance payments, and mixing wages with deductions for living expenses, entrapped Syrian workers and intermediaries in a relationship of overdependence, and a debt spiral. In turn, this reduced workers' bargaining power with intermediaries, and their ability to reject further work. Consider the complicated financial arrangement laid out by Abu Farhan,²⁶ a 55-year old Syrian intermediary in Qabb Ilyas, eastern Lebanon. Abu Farhan is responsible for a group of 67 Syrians, 40 of whom are women, and runs the informal camp that the workers live in.

I visit each tent every evening and give workers instructions. [For example,] I tell [a female worker:] “You will work in garlic for two days starting tomorrow.” [...]. Once they finish working at the end of each day, I record on a card how many hours each family has worked and how much they earned. I give a card to each family. I pay workers what they're owed each two or three months or at the end of the year. I have a notebook to record expenses. I record every time a family takes from me 100,000, 50,000 or one million [Lebanese Pound, i.e. £49, £25, or £491]. I record that x took this amount of money from me on this date. I allocate two or three pages of my notebook for each family. I deduct the annual rent and electricity fee from the wages which I pay to workers. You know I pay the electricity fee and I pay for bread in advance on their behalf. The bread vendor visits our camp every day at 7 am and provides us with 100 or 150 bags of bread. [At the end of the year], I pay each worker what they're owed after making the necessary deductions and I renew the work agreement with each worker for the next year.

Abu Farhan's bookkeeping efforts show that he is involved in the payment of refugees' wages, but also of running costs, including for electricity, rent, and bread. While he settles his accounts with refugee workers every couple of months, in the meantime, refugees keep accruing new debts for living expenses. Of course, not all intermediaries are also refugees' landlords, and financial relationships are not always as complex; across the region, most refugees do not live in either formal or informal camps. Still, 37% (7/19) of agricultural workers in Jordan and 25% (5/20) of workers in northern Syria had received an advance payment for their most recent job

²⁶ All names of study participants have been changed.

from their intermediary or employer. Most intermediaries we interviewed (75%, 15/5) also confirmed that they offered advance payments to their workers. Intermediaries took track of payments through keeping ledgers, and handing out cards to refugees that later served as proof of the total working hours. As Abu Farhan's statement illustrates, advance payments were subtracted from workers' first salaries or outstanding wages at the end of the harvesting season. The financial complexity of these arrangements is exacerbated by increasingly irregular payment rhythms: 11% of workers (9/80) reported being paid less frequently, and 46% (37/80) were paid more irregularly, compared to before the pandemic.

Taken together, these findings present a mixed picture: while Syrian workers did not usually experience physical coercion at the hands of intermediaries or employers, they were often entrapped in complicated financial relationships. As such, they would probably not meet the threshold of the ILO's definition of "forced labour". In recent years, Migration and Modern Slavery Studies scholars have criticised the ILO's narrow understanding of "forced labour" as acts of coercion committed by *individual* employers or states.²⁷ The ILO definition singles out extreme acts of labour exploitation, while obscuring much more common, insidious forms of precarious work, such as the conditions experienced by Syrian agricultural workers. To be clear, not all refugees described agricultural labour during the pandemic as exploitative, and working conditions may have changed for the same individuals throughout the course of the pandemic; exploitation is thus better understood on a continuum.²⁸ In addition, the ILO definition explicitly excludes more structural forces that may compel a person to accept exploitative work (cf. "the employer or the State are not accountable for all external constraints or indirect coercion existing in practice: for example, the need to work in order to earn one's living").²⁹

Following O'Connell Davidson, we argue that the Western liberal notion of freedom as "freedom *from* something", which underpins binary policy definitions of "forced labour" and "forced migration", does not fit the lived realities of many mobile people.³⁰ Before the onset of the Syrian conflict, many Syrians had migrated seasonally inside Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, to find informal employment in agriculture.³¹ As refugees, many have returned to work with the

²⁷ For a summary of this debate, see Genieve LeBaron, Penelope Kyritsis, Cameron Thibos, and Neil Howard, "Confronting Root Causes: Forced Labour in Global Supply Chains," openDemocracy, March 19, 2019, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/confronting-root-causes/>.

²⁸ Klara Skrivankova, *Between Decent Work and Forced Labour: Examining the Continuum of Exploitation*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010).

²⁹ ILO, *Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations. Report III (Part 1A). International Labour Conference, 90th Session* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2002), 98.

³⁰ Julia O'Connell Davidson, "New slavery, old binaries: Human trafficking and the borders of 'freedom'," *Global Networks* 10, no.2 (2010): 244–261; Julia O'Connell Davidson, "Troubling freedom: Migration, debt, and modern slavery," *Migration Studies* 1, no.2. (2013): 176–195.

³¹ John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

same employers.³² In displacement contexts around the world, we find similar examples of migrants-turned-refugee workers, and migrants and refugee workers moving and toiling alongside each other.³³ There is no doubt that all Syrian workers in this study have experienced forced migration and the loss of livelihoods, but this does not preclude the fact that they continue to take active decisions on where to seek agricultural employment, and often choose to remain with the same intermediaries with whom they have partnered for years. Instead of considering some people as inherently “free” or “unfree”, we thus ask how “unfreedom” is *politically constructed*. If we accept a broader definition of “unfree labour” that accounts for economic necessity and the effects of structural forces, but also workers’ agency in opting for exploitative work,³⁴ then we can reappraise the factors that push displaced Syrians to accept work in agriculture: longstanding marginalisation in host countries, together with the added economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike historical forms of forced labour, informal employment in agriculture is often short-term, paid, and accepted by displaced Syrian workers without coercion by employers. As Nicola Phillips remarks, “in contemporary global production, unfreedom is primarily constituted not by coerced entry but by precluded exit.”³⁵ To paraphrase LeBaron et al.³⁶, the particularity of displaced Syrians’ “unfreedom” is that they lack the “power to say no” to jobs over whose conditions they have no control.

3) Disposable workers with kinship ties

In this section, we argue that politically produced forms of marginalisation – notably refugees’ lack of labour rights and decent work standards – act in concert with neoliberal market dynamics to produce realities of “unfreedom” for Syrian agricultural workers.³⁷ A key insight of Modern Slavery Studies is that “unfree labour” is not a vestige of the past – it is central to the

³² Lama Mourad, “Brothers, Workers or Syrians? The Politics of Naming in Lebanese Municipalities,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no.2 (2021): 1387–1399; Ann-Christin Zuntz, “Refugees’ Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances: Syrian Mobilities in the Middle East Before and After 2011,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no.2 (2021): 1400–1422.

³³ Oliver Bakewell, “Research Beyond the Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no.4 (2008): 432–453; Alessandro Monsutti, “Afghan migratory strategies and the three solutions to the refugee problem,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no.1 (2008): 58–73.

³⁴ For example Filipe Calvao, “Unfree Labour,” *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 45 (2016): 451–67; Nicola Phillips, “Unfree labour and adverse incorporation in the global economy: Comparative perspectives on Brazil and India,” *Economy and Society* 42, no.2 (2013): 171–196; Strauss, “Coerced, forced and unfree labour”, 7–148.

³⁵ Phillips, “Unfree labour and adverse incorporation”, 178.

³⁶ LeBaron, Howard, Cameron et al., *Confronting Root Causes*.

³⁷ Hannah Lewis, Peter Dwyer, Stuart Hodgkinson, and Louise Waite, “Hyper-precarious lives: Migrants, work and forced labour in the Global North,” *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no.5 (2015): 580–600.

function of contemporary supply chain capitalism.³⁸ This analysis goes hand in hand with a critical appraisal of the effects of capitalist markets: although long touted as a solution to ending poverty in the Global South, the inclusion of poor people into markets has entrenched, rather than diminished, their marginalisation. Across the Mediterranean, migrant (and female) labour has come to play a central role in agriculture because the inclusion of regional economies into global supply chains has increased pressure on small-scale suppliers to minimise costs by subcontracting cheap, flexible, and exploitable workforces.³⁹ As *refugees*, often unable to obtain jobs in other sectors due to their legal status, Syrian agricultural workers have entered segmented agricultural labour markets at the very bottom. Tellingly, most Syrians in our sample do not compete for jobs with locals, but rather with other migrants, for example with Egyptians in Jordan.⁴⁰ This “rivalry among the poor”⁴¹ is not a side-effect of a largely informal sector, but allows agricultural employers to cut labour costs as the most marginalised workers – in this case Syrian refugees – are willing to work for particularly low wages. Hence, it would be a mistake to ascribe exploitative refugee labour to Syrians’ economic exclusion in host countries. Rather, refugees have joined agricultural labour markets that need seasonal and mobile workforces, and that prefer the most vulnerable, and thus cheapest, workers, for badly paid and exploitative jobs that are not attractive to local workforces.⁴² Making visible the dynamics of Syrians’ “adverse incorporation”⁴³ into neoliberal economies with specific labour needs allows us to get to the core of refugees’ “unfreedom”. In agriculture, displaced Syrians get poorer *through working*: in a volatile labour market, they further descend into a circle of debts, advance payments, and yet more exploitative jobs. Seasonal employment also keeps Syrian children outside the educational system, thus producing a new generation of exploitable workers. Even non-working refugee children risk missing schooling as many families move between different seasonal work sites.⁴⁴ In this regard, the situation of displaced Syrians working in Middle Eastern agriculture is not

³⁸ Stephanie Barrientos, Uma Kothari, and Nicola Phillips, “Dynamics of Unfree Labour in the Contemporary Global Economy,” *Journal of Development Studies* 49, no.8 (2013): 1037-1041; Tom Brass, “Medieval working practices?” British agriculture and the return of the gangmaster,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 31 (2004): 313–340.

³⁹ Joerg Gertel and Sarah Ruth Sippel, eds., *Seasonal Workers in Mediterranean Agriculture* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014); Alessandra Corrado, Carlos De Castro, and Domenico Perrotta, eds., *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and change in the Mediterranean area* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2017).

⁴⁰ Allison Hartnett, “The Effect of Refugee Integration on Migrant Labor in Jordan,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no.2 (2018): 263–282; Kattaa, Byrne and Al-Arabi, *Decent Work and the Agriculture Sector in Jordan*; Tamkeen, *Forgotten Rights: The Working and Living Conditions of Migrant Workers in the Agricultural Sector in Jordan* (Amman: Tamkeen, 2014).

⁴¹ Development Workshop, *Fertile Lands, Bitter Lives: The Situation Analysis Report on Syrian Seasonal Agricultural Workers in the Adana Plain* (Ankara: Development Workshop, 2016) 8.

⁴² Sinem Kavak, “Syrian refugees in seasonal agricultural work: a case of adverse incorporation in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 54 (2016): 33–53.

⁴³ Philips, “Unfree labour and adverse incorporation”.

⁴⁴ Development Workshop, *Fertile Lands, Bitter Lives*.

unlike that of Mexican and Central American farmworkers in the US⁴⁵, and West African migrants working in the Italian tomato harvest.⁴⁶ What all have in common is that restrictive migration or asylum policies, which limit their access to the formal labour market and labour rights, facilitate their entry into exploitative, insecure work relationships.

Where a political economy approach falls short is when it comes to understanding *how* particular people in particular places are drawn into global capitalism. Here, we develop a proposition made by Anna Tsing on the role of cultural difference in global supply chains.⁴⁷ Global supply chains tend to be associated with processes of “economic, political, and ecological standardization”.⁴⁸ However, Tsing argues, diversity is not incidental, but vital to the functioning and expansion of supply chain capitalism. Following Tsing, anthropologists have studied a number of context-specific niches: for example, how child labour in the Ghanaian cocoa production occurs more frequently in divorced families⁴⁹, and how patriarchal family structures oblige Mexican teenager daughters to take part in the strawberry harvest in California.⁵⁰ This type of anthropological scholarship chimes with recent interest in Modern Slavery Studies in the role of kinship, gender, and social reproduction in upholding wage labour relationships.⁵¹

In the context of displaced Syrian agricultural workers, our contention is that in order to understand Syrians' peculiar positioning in global capitalism, we have to pay attention to the moral economy of extended kinship networks. Anthropologists of the Middle East have demonstrated that people access and circulate resources through their next of kin.⁵² Extended Syrian families often function as economic units, with different household members taking on

⁴⁵ Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Teresa M. Mares, *Life on the Other Border, Farmworkers and Food Justice in Vermont* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

⁴⁶ Alessandra Corrado, “Clandestini in the Orange Towns: Migrations and racisms in Calabria's agriculture,” *Race/Ethnicity* 4, no.2 (2011): 191–201; Domenico Perrotta, “Agricultural day laborers in Southern Italy: Forms of mobility and resistance,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no.1 (2015): 195–203.

⁴⁷ Anna Tsing, “Supply chains and the human condition,” *Rethink. Marx.* 21, no.2 (2009):148–176.

⁴⁸ Tsing, “Supply chains and the human condition”, 150.

⁴⁹ Amanda Berlan, “Social sustainability in agriculture: an anthropological perspective on child labour in cocoa production in Ghana,” *Journal of Development Studies* 49, no.8 (2013): 1088–100.

⁵⁰ Teresa Figueroa Sanchez, “Californian strawberries: Mexican immigrant women sharecroppers, labor, and discipline,” *Anthropol. Work Rev.* 34, no.1 (2013):15–26.

⁵¹ Ellie Gore and Genieve LeBaron, “Using social reproduction theory to understand unfree labour,” *Capital & Class* 43, no.4 (2019): 561–580.

⁵² Suad Joseph, “Problematizing Gender and Relational Rights: Experiences from Lebanon,” *Social Politics* 1, no.3 (1994): 271–85; Suad Joseph, “Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World,” *Gender & Development* 4, no.2 (1996): 14–19.

paid or unpaid tasks.⁵³ While the Syrian conflict and mass displacement have somewhat eroded kinship networks⁵⁴, displaced families keep following each other to sites of refuge, help each other access jobs in agriculture, and circulate remittances across closed borders.⁵⁵ Kinship is thus relevant to a study of refugee labour because of how agricultural workforces and recruitment processes are organised in the Middle East. Workers' relationships with land owners are usually negotiated by intermediaries, called *shaweeesh* in Arabic, a practice well documented for Turkish seasonal migratory workers and Syrian refugees in Turkey⁵⁶, domestic Syrian migrant workers inside Syria⁵⁷ and in Lebanon⁵⁸, and more recently also in Jordan, where Syrian refugees introduced the role of the intermediary after 2011.⁵⁹ Intermediaries serve as a liaison between employers and workers: they recruit labourers, drive them to fields and greenhouses, oversee their work, and arrange their payment. Besides sub-contracting labour and offering informal banking services, intermediaries are also often members of refugees' extended families. Hence, we can only understand Syrian workers' recruitment and working conditions if we factor in the language of kinship, patriarchal obeisance, and belonging. Work in Middle Eastern agriculture is deeply relational, and zooming in on the ties between workers and intermediaries (and sometimes employers) is a unique entry point for understanding how Syrian refugees get trapped at the beginning of global supply chains. In our study, 61% (49/80) of workers relied on intermediaries to find their most recent job. These numbers are even higher in Turkey, where Syrians rely on Turkish-speaking intermediaries to communicate with employers (65%, 13/20), and in Lebanon, where many intermediaries operate informal camps for refugees, and are thus simultaneously refugees' employment agents and landlords (85%, 17/20). Across study countries, 42% (28/66) of respondents reported that they could not find jobs on their own – often because they lacked contacts with agricultural employers in new sites of refuge, as well as knowledge of local agricultural production sites and transport routes.

Policymakers and anti-human trafficking activists in the Global North have vilified labour contractors, people smugglers, and other intermediaries who facilitate refugees' movements and work, as “evil gangmasters”. However, this does not do justice to how Syrian

⁵³ Annika Rabo, ““Doing Family”: Two Cases in Contemporary Syria’.” *Hawwa*, 6, no.2 (2008), 129–53; Andrea Rugh, *Within the Circle: Parents and Children in an Arab Village* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Michelle Lokot, ““Blood Doesn’t Become Water”? Syrian Social Relations during Displacement,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33, no.3 (2020): 555–576; Matthew R. Stevens, “The Collapse of Social Networks among Syrian Refugees in Urban Jordan,” *Contemporary Levant* 1, no.1 (2016): 51–63.

⁵⁵ Zuntz, “Refugees’ Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances”.

⁵⁶ Development Workshop, “*A Child’s Work Makes A Day’s Wage...*” *Agricultural Intermediaries and Child Labour in Agricultural Production in Turkey* (Ankara: Development Workshop, 2018).

⁵⁷ Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck, “Does the Feminisation of Agricultural Labour Empower Women?”

⁵⁸ Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage*.

⁵⁹ Kattaa, Byrne and Al-Arabiati, *Decent Work and the Agriculture Sector in Jordan*; Zuntz, “Refugees’ Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances”.

refugees and intermediaries themselves described their relationships with each other. In our study, they often had longstanding connections: 88% (42/48) had worked with the same intermediary before, and 95% (19/20) of intermediaries confirmed that the nationality of workers, and the composition of their workforce, had not changed during the pandemic. In a similar vein, 71% (34/48) of workers described their relationship as “good”, and only 4% (2/48) as “tense”. Among Syrians who used intermediaries, only 15% of workers were recruited by members of their extended family. Even then, the language of (fictive) kinship permeated both workers’ and intermediaries’ statements, and even came to include non-Syrian labour contractors. As 58-year old Abu Anas, a Lebanese intermediary working with Syrian refugees in eastern Lebanon, explained, this shared sentiment is based on years of living and working together:

You are not present in person to understand my relationship with my workers. I behave as if I am one of them, I live with them most of the time. I barely spend two hours at my house in total at day and night. Our relationship is no longer one between a shaweesh and workers. I consider that all of us are people of the same country now. They have been here for so many years and I used to visit them in Syria before. When I spend five or ten hours with the same person every day, we become very close.

As Neil Howard has argued in the context of migrant labour in Italian agriculture, intermediaries are “facilitators of an unjust system [rather] than [...] architects of systemic injustice.”⁶⁰ The complexity of worker-intermediary relationships becomes particularly clear when we consider how some intermediaries use their privileged access to Syrian refugees to collaborate with local security authorities. In Lebanon, like in other Middle Eastern host countries, ambivalent refugee-reception policies have made many Syrian refugees illegal, pushing them to work in the informal economy with no labour or residency rights.⁶¹ Intermediaries like Abu Anas, who keep close tracks of refugees’ whereabouts, help make these workers visible to the Lebanese state:

[The workers] don't have work permits. But there's a tacit oral understanding with the state that in Lebanon, in the Bekaa area in particular, landowners are in need of workers and that the shaweesh provides these workers. [...] This type of work was kind of unofficial before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. [...] With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the flock of refugees, the state now knows how many workers I supervise and how many people live in the camp through the Army Intelligence, the State Security, the municipality, the Information Branch [of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces]. I officially inform the state that I am a shaweesh, I have a code for my camp

⁶⁰ Neil Howard and Roberto Forin, “Migrant workers, ‘modern slavery’ and the politics of representation in Italian tomato production,” *Economy and Society* 48, no.4 (2019): 579-601.

⁶¹ Maja Janmyr, “Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35 (2016): 58–78.

which the state and the UN knows. I disclose how many workers I supervise and receive a report from the Army Intelligence on a regular basis. I have to inform the intelligence when anyone leaves my camp. A few days ago two families left my camp to the Akkar area. I took them to the intelligence and informed them that these people want to leave. They crossed their names out of the list of workers for whom I am responsible.

Abu Anas' case demonstrates that intermediaries are not simply the handmaids of capitalist exploiters, as it hints at a tacit understanding by authorities in Lebanon that refugees should be able to work in agriculture, despite their legal status. Thus, the figure of the *shaweeesh* condenses the interlinkages between neoliberal businesses, and their need for mobile workforces, and host-countries' refugee-reception policies, which produce these workers. These joint dynamics of exploitation and containment are particularly effective because they are channelled through actors that Syrians have trustful, and often familial, relationships with.

Conclusion

In this article, we offered a discussion of displaced Syrians' unfree labour at the intersection of restrictive asylum policies, global economies, and kinship. Instead of treating refugee labour as a humanitarian anomaly, we included it in a broader analysis of how marginalized people enter globalised economies built on cheap, mobile workforces. We demonstrated that the ILO's definition of "forced labour", which emphasises acts of coercion by *individual* employers or states, fails to capture the complex reality of displaced Syrians' "unfreedom". Insights from Modern Slavery Studies on the role of economic necessity in shaping workers' willingness to accept non-decent jobs help us make sense of the perfect storm that displaced Syrians experience: the mutually reinforcing effects of structural marginalisation in refugee-receiving countries, entrenched poverty, volatile labour markets, and debt relationships. Although our study was conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, all these factors predate the current crisis, having long been characteristics of how migrant labour is organised in the Middle Eastern agriculture. However, their effects have been further exacerbated by pandemic-related movement restrictions and economic losses. To displaced Syrians, poverty and "unfreedom" go hand in hand, as exploitative, informal labour entrenches insecure livelihoods, lack of access to education, and thus the absence of present and future options.

To grasp Syrians' positioning in global capitalism, we combined a political economy perspective with a grounded ethnographic approach. On the one hand, Syrians' working conditions have to be situated in the context of migrant agricultural workers' struggles globally. In this regard, they are one case study of how restrictive migration and asylum policies produce the perfect - i.e. disposable - workforces for neoliberal markets. On the other hand, we can only fully understand Syrians' role in Middle Eastern agriculture through their specific historic and cultural context, namely the role of kinship networks, through which displaced people circulate

resources and find jobs. Our ethnographic close-up of agricultural intermediaries highlights the heterogeneous nature of global supply chains, which exploit specific socioeconomic and cultural niches.

Thinking about forced labour as one end of a spectrum of exploitation raises new questions about what counts as “acceptable” exploitation in capitalist economies, and what the alternative to displaced Syrians’ “unfreedom” could be. Anthropologists have gathered ethnographic evidence that in many parts of the world, the opposite of “unfreedom” is not “freedom”, in the Western liberal sense of autonomy and independence. They have documented that people may willingly seek out forms of dependency and patronage – say, “unfreedom” – to secure access to resources.⁶² As Kopytoff famously argued, “ethnographically, the opposite of slavery in most societies (and with the striking exception of the modern West) is some notion not of autonomy but of citizenship, of civic belongingness, of attachment to structure rather than detachment from it.”⁶³ In the context of displaced Syrians working in agriculture, this means that typical humanitarian approaches that aim to turn refugees into successful micro-entrepreneurs through micro-credit and vocational training fail to account for refugees’ obligations within extended kinship networks.⁶⁴ Ultimately, the solution to Syrians’ “unfreedom” is not to free them from individual intermediaries, but rather to free them from the effects of exclusionary structures, by offering them a greater form of attachment in host countries.

What could this attachment look like? In a context in which refugees work alongside marginalised migrants, critical evaluations of humanitarian experiments such as the Jordan Compact indicate that work permits alone may not translate into greater legal security for refugee workers. An alternative and more radical approach, already tried out with communities in India, would be to provide displaced households with social protections such as unconditional basic income.⁶⁵ Cash assistance has emerged as a major form of intervention during the Syrian crisis, but it is often reserved for female-headed households, the disabled, the elderly, and others considered particularly vulnerable.⁶⁶ Such humanitarian tools are not usually employed in the fight against modern slavery. Extending cash assistance to a greater mass of refugees could

⁶² Antonio De Lauri, “The Absence of Freedom. Debt, Bondage and Desire among Pakistani Brick Kiln Workers,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 2 (2017): 122–138; James Ferguson, “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no.2 (2013): 223–242.

⁶³ Igor Kopytoff, “Slavery,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1982): 221.

⁶⁴ Evan Easton-Calabria and Naohiko Omata, “Panacea for the Refugee Crisis? Rethinking the Promotion of ‘Self-Reliance’ for Refugees,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no.8 (2018): 1458–1474; Evan Easton-Calabria and Maurice Herson, “In Praise of Dependencies: Dispersed Dependencies and Displacement,” *Disasters* 44, no.1 (2020): 44–62; Zuntz, “Refugees’ Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances”.

⁶⁵ Neil Howard, “WorkFREE,” University of Bath, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/projects/workfree-erc-starting-grant-transfer-in>

⁶⁶ Cash Learning Partnership, “Cross-sector cash assistance for Syrian refugees and host communities in Lebanon: An IRC Programme,” CALP, 2014, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/calp-case-study-lebanon-web.pdf>

increase displaced workers' ability to say "no" to exploitative jobs. In displacement settings, cash assistance is short-term, and humanitarian funding shortfalls often mean that it is inconsistent. However, Syrian agricultural workers in the Middle East live in protracted displacement, and such investments in social protection would need to be similarly long-term, until both legal and workplace protections for displaced people improve.

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