


The ‘UNFAIR’ refugee agency: UNHCR accountability after protests and violence

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Abstract

Urban refugees increasingly resort to sit-ins outside United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) offices because they lack avenues for accountability. Our fieldwork reveals their experiences of neglect, mistreatment, and violence and the ways that these are compounded by UNHCR's responses to protests, generating deep mistrust. Drawing on interviews with refugees in three protest sites and a workshop with legal practitioners, we document disturbing accusations, implicating UNHCR in human rights violations. We reflect on these findings and explore the possibility of transforming the agency's accountability relations in the context of declining budgets and influence. We argue that the agency must abandon its securitized response to refugee-led protests and adopt a 'networked accountability' approach, engaging with the plural authorities that hold legitimacy in refugee protection. Although UNHCR is currently structurally dependent upon major donors and host states, it must embed accountability relations with refugee-led organizations (RLOs), NGOs, and legal practitioners to fulfil its mandate and protect refugees.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is losing the trust of the refugees it is mandated to protect—to whom it ought to be accountable. The organization has considerable administrative control over refugees' lives, making it a *quasi* 'government' (Pallis 2005: 870), functioning as a 'UN surrogate state' (Kagan 2011). Our research into urban refugee protests against UNHCR compels us to question its governmental actions and relations and to explore avenues for change. We recognize that UNHCR faces unprecedented challenges. Powerful states are withdrawing from, or actively undermining, the core commitments of international refugee law, signalling 'an illiberal dismantling of the international refugee regime' (Lavenex 2024: 11). Its budget was already shrinking (UNHCR 2024) before the new US administration's cuts forced reductions in

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activity by up to one-third (France24 2025). UNHCR has also been expelled from or compelled to suspend services in both Libya and Egypt (Booty 2025; ECRE 2025). Nevertheless, as the primary actor for refugee protection, UNHCR must do better. Without reform, it risks being perceived as the 'UNFAIR Agency' losing its 'moral authority' and its ability to promote humanitarian responses and durable solutions for refugees.¹

The history of recent urban refugee protests in the countries studied exposes UNHCR's governmental role and its accountability problem.² In 2005, 3,000 Sudanese refugees appealed for protection in a three-month sit-in outside UNHCR's Cairo office, declaring 'We Live in a Country of UNHCR' (Moulin and Nyers 2007). Despite a strategy of non-violence, they were brutally dispersed by Egyptian police at the behest of local UNHCR officials, resulting in tragic deaths, arrests, and disappearances (Azzam 2006). Sit-ins have since become a familiar repertoire of protest against UNHCR, replicated in countries, such as Libya and Tunisia. A similar pattern has emerged, with local UNHCR staff turning to the police to have the protesters evicted, leading to further violence, detentions, expulsions, and even deaths (Stierl and Tazzioli 2022; Human Rights Watch 2023).

This reflection highlights the neglect, mistreatment, and violence experienced by refugees that we witnessed during our research, and evaluates UNHCR's accountability failures, with attention to insights from lawyers, and activists. It explains our obligation to respond and our hopes for future UNHCR policies and actions. To conduct our research, we drew on literature that problematizes apolitical ethnographic work in the field of refugee and migration studies (De Genova 2013) to ask first: what does practical solidarity with refugees look like under conditions of extreme violence, where institutions fail to respond? and second: how can UNHCR address its accountability deficit? It is our sense of anger and frustration at the treatment experienced by our research participants and collaborators that drives us to intervene in policy debates.

Based on our fieldwork, we argue that UNHCR must abandon its securitized approach to protest and adopt a refugee-first framework. We call for a 'networked accountability' model that embeds mechanisms to engage with legitimate civil society actors in refugee protection, including RLOs, lawyers, human rights advocates, and humanitarian NGOs. Our reflection proceeds in two steps. First, we discuss our fieldwork encounters with refugees in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia and the forms of violence they have experienced while protesting against UNHCR failures. Next, we scrutinize existing UNHCR accountability mechanisms and policies and consider 'what is to be done', making our own proposals.

2. Researching the protests: encounters with violence and repression

Our research focuses on the memory and heritage of refugee-led protests against UNHCR. Each of us has undertaken ethnographic research with refugees in urban areas either in Egypt, Tunisia, and in Europe, as well as online, with members of the *Refugees in Libya* organization. In each of these countries, violence towards refugees took place within a broader context of civil and human rights violations towards the general population, and crackdowns on dissent against individuals and organizations. Our subsequent questions about UNHCR's (in)actions in response to refugee sit-ins led us to convene a workshop on UNHCR accountability with human rights lawyers and legal activists from Egypt, Tunisia, and Italy in December 2023.³ We learned that UNHCR has neither effectively responded to refugees' and legal activists' complaints, nor been

¹ 'UNFAIR' is the name of a campaign by Refugees in Libya-affiliated activists with lived experience that challenges and exposes what they believe are UNHCR's failures.

² Critical migration scholars (Anderson 2017) highlight that the label 'refugee' excludes many people fleeing social and structural violence because mobility is racialized, classed, and rendered problematic. However, we use the term because the refugee protesters themselves rejected a narrow definition, claiming the refugee label for all, regardless of status.

³ We came together with representatives of Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI) *Terre pour tous*, and Refugee Platform in Egypt.

held accountable for harmful actions—despite pressure from refugees, activists, and legal practitioners. It is this distressing situation that calls upon us to intervene in the policy terrain.

Our fieldwork was informed by a 'patchwork' approach and 'an activist sensibility' (see Bird 2024). It took place within a broader global environment of increased hostility towards migrants, a notable decline in rights and increasing pressures for mobility (Garelli and Tazzioli 2017). We either witnessed firsthand the violence towards migrants in these contexts or learned of it through our conversations with survivors and witnesses. In response to extreme levels of border violence and structural injustice, we asked ourselves: what ethical obligations are generated by conducting research with, or alongside, refugee populations?

Concerns about the methodology and ethics of research with refugee and migrant populations are far from new. Distinctions have been made between 'procedural ethics', such as the formal ethical process researchers go through at their institutions, and 'ethics in practice', that arise in the field (e.g. Block et al. 2013). However, this work often overlooks the ethical obligations we face when returning to our desks—obligations shaped by our positionality (as citizens with privileges denied to refugees) and by our political and human rights commitments. Following De Genova, we recognize that as migration scholars we are entangled in the 'same socio-political processes and struggles through which the "national" configuration of "society" ... is reified and actualized as the territorial expression of state power' (2013: 253). This has methodological consequences, making apolitical ethnographic research 'almost impossible, as well as ethically problematic' (Halilovich 2022) in contexts rife with human rights violations.

To think through these dilemmas, we were informed by work that examines the theory and practice of politically engaged research (Juris 2007). As engaged ethnographers, we adopted a tripartite account of responsibility: as human beings towards our research participants with whom we might have a relationship; as scientific beings, to deliver academically rigorous research; and as political beings that are compelled to engage politically (Scharenberg 2023).

We approached research participants and social movements as 'knowledge producers' in their own right (Casas et al. 2011: 199). As such, we saw ourselves as 'editors of collective knowledges rather than the sole producers of scientific theory' (Scharenberg 2023: 16), organizing stakeholder workshops with refugees, activists, and lawyers. Confronted with accounts of border violence and rights violations, we also assumed the role of witness, feeling a duty to our research partners to speak out. As Scheper-Hughes writes, 'witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations' (1995: 419). In what follows, we reflect on findings from three refugee protests in Cairo, Tunis, and Tripoli/Geneva, outlining the grievances and demands behind the mobilizations, the violence that unfolded, and the refugees' perceptions of UNHCR in each case. The names of all individuals have been anonymized and research participants are referred to by their role (e.g. South Sudanese community leader).

2.1 Cairo⁴

Grievances among sub-Saharan African refugees in Cairo against UNHCR are deep-rooted and persistent, expressed through repeated demonstrations and intensified by violent crackdowns, notably the 2005 'Mustafa Mahmoud massacre'. Interviewees echoed long-standing claims of neglect, mistreatment, and racism by UNHCR staff. As one South Sudanese refugee put it: 'That UN body is dominated by Egyptians [who] don't classify us as people'. Refugees described the organization as inaccessible, its staff as routinely humiliating, and its response to complaints—about material hardship, failed asylum claims, deportations, arbitrary detentions, and rights violations in work and education—as consistently inadequate. Many also expressed fear over UNHCR's relationship with Egyptian security forces, shaped by firsthand experience or awareness of repressive responses to refugee protests.

⁴ Based on Ibreck's research in Cairo, including in 2018–2019 (with Seeka, see Ibreck and Seeka 2022) and 26 interviews with Sudanese, Eritrean, and other African refugees, legal experts, humanitarian workers, and community leaders: a group discussion with ten survivors of the 2005 protest in August 2022 and January 2023.

The 2005 protest stands out as a large-scale, protracted sit-in outside UNHCR with a catastrophic ending. Refugees recalled mobilizing in Mustafa Mahmoud square when UNHCR decided to suspend interviews for all Sudanese (including pre-independence southern Sudanese). It was an act of desperation as the organization was 'prevent[ing] any person with dark skin from approaching the window', as a lawyer confirmed. In response, UNHCR met with some protest 'leaders' but offered no concessions, instead closing its offices, claiming that protesters were not 'persons of concern' and writing three letters to the Egyptian authorities requesting that they disperse the demonstration (Harrell-Bond 2008: 227).

The violent dispersal of protesters on 29 December 2005 remains 'a collective trauma' for the refugees. Survivors described being surrounded by thousands of police and attacked with a chlorinated water cannon, batons, and other weapons, resulting in fatalities and many more injuries. They allege that the number of deaths was far higher than the official number of twenty-nine (Azzam 2006), because only the deaths of people with documents were officially recorded, while many of the victims were children and some people later disappeared after incarceration. The refugees felt utterly abandoned, as one Darfuri refugee explained: 'the UN, they withdrew and left the file [issue] to the security [services]'.

Rather than learning from this devastating incident, UNHCR continued to employ a security-first approach in Cairo, marginalizing refugees' complaints. Sporadic small-scale protests by Ethiopian, Sudanese, and Eritrean refugees outside UNHCR's office over the years have been swiftly shut down by security actors. While the treatment of refugees has been condemned by human rights organizations, UNHCR has refrained from comment (HRW 2022). An Eritrean refugee who participated in protests between 2018 and 2019 that ended in arrests spoke of the terrible consequences that ensued for his community:

a lot of my friends were caught and arrested ... and then a lot of young Eritreans decided to leave this country ... Some they went to the desert and passed away, and some went back to Sudan.

A human rights organization confirmed that when security forces forcibly dispersed Eritrean demonstrators outside UNHCR in 2019, they arrested and injured dozens of protesters. Five of those arrested were imprisoned for three months, accused of being ringleaders, charged with gathering, incitement, and blocking the road. They were later prosecuted and sentenced to between three and 5 years, despite that, according to a human rights lawyer working on their appeal, 'they did nothing' (Egyptian lawyer, December 2022). The 2019 protest marked an escalation in the Egyptian authorities' 'hostility' against refugees and the beginning of a wave of arbitrary detentions and forcible deportations of Eritreans, all of which went 'without comment' from UNHCR, according to the Refugee Platform in Egypt (ibid). In essence, UNHCR has repeatedly either directly called upon the police or security to deal with overwhelmingly non-violent refugee protesters or remained silent in the face of their repressive actions.

Survivors of the 2005 massacre continue to bear physical injuries and mental scars, and some still struggle for memory and justice. They gave searing accounts of their suffering. A Nuba refugee was haunted by the dead bodies he saw at the protest site, among them dead babies and children being collected in bags by policemen. A South Sudanese community leader who was rounded up by police and incarcerated recounts seeing four other demonstrators die of their injuries in an underground prison. He was eventually released with UNHCR's help, but it was on the condition that he would 'not do any activities to defend the refugees' in future. Several refugees contributed to an investigation by Egyptian human rights lawyer Ashraf Ruxi and Interights, who submitted a communication to the African Commission of Human Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) on behalf of the victims, winning the case in 2020. But this legal victory has yet to have any impact on their lives. Instead, in the face of institutional silence, survivors have been left to try to quietly preserve the memory of the massacre among themselves. One group held secret annual commemorations, explaining 'We are still Mustafa Mahmood ... we live to remember those who passed away during that time ... all these memories is still in our head'.

UNHCR has offered neither remedy nor remorse. In 2005, the former High Commissioner Antonio Guterres rightly expressed sorrow about the 'tragedy' while noting that the lack of 'a clear picture of what transpired' (quoted in [Sudan Tribune 2005](#)). The agency helped to extract documented refugees 'with cards' from prison and selectively resettled some of the protest leaders. However, UNCHR took no action when the facts of the incident were later exposed. Shockingly, it has yet to respond to the landmark ACHPR decision issued in 2020 which confirmed the organization's role in sending 'repeated requests ... to the State to end the protest' ([ACHPR 2021](#), 29). Adding insult to injury, the organization sought to silence memories of the massacre. One refugee described how a meeting with community leaders at UNCHR (in 2023) was abruptly brought to a halt when a Sudanese father grieving for the loss of his son in the massacre became emotional and spoke out: 'The agenda of the meeting UNHCR was talking about the importance of the refugees'; but [he said] 'you say that refugees are important, but what happened in Mustafa Mahmood shows you don't care about the refugees'. The meeting was quickly cancelled and changed to another day, but the man who lost his son was not invited by UNHCR. Such individual actions, coupled with UNHCR's institutional failures to protect refugee protesters illustrates why new approaches to accountability are urgently needed.

2.2 Tripoli and Geneva⁵

Refugees in Libya (RiL) is a multi-national, multi-ethnic, refugee-led political organization that first formed in Tripoli, Libya. The creation of RiL was a response to the 'unconscionable' nightmares of torture, extortions, forced conscription, and sexual violence that refugees in Libya experience (see [Johnson 2024](#)). We followed RiL protests online for over a year while conducting research on UNHCR's urban refugee policies and responses to protests. In December 2022 in Geneva Switzerland, we met many of the organization's leaders, at the 'From Tripoli to Geneva' protest, that replicated their actions in Tripoli by calling for a sit-in outside UNHCR's Geneva office.

The Tripoli sit-in originated in a non-violent attempt to convince UNCHR to enhance refugee protection and support. Refugees gathered outside UNHCR's Community Day Centre (CDC), 'looking for protection and respect for our rights as human beings' ([Refugees in Libya n.d.](#)). They fled there following a raid on their temporary settlement in Gargaresh on 1 October, when the police fired live rounds at refugees and incarcerated some of them in detention centres, where they were ill-treated and tortured ([Amnesty International 2021](#)). As one refugee told us, the protest consisted of pregnant women and many people who had been shot. Others joined due to longer-term grievances directed at UNHCR itself. Refugees emphasized that the agency's service provision was entirely inadequate to accommodate the needs of some 4,500 people seeking support, including vulnerable women who were trafficked, victims of torture and minors without shelter. In the words of one RiL member: 'you only have one registration office, one community centre, you don't have your own hospital'. They concluded that: 'They don't care. The asylum process takes more than ten years. This is inhuman'. They hoped that UNHCR would denounce the violence, protect the protesters, and provide medical assistance, but to no avail: 'we couldn't access any service every service was blocked to us by the government and by the UNHCR'. Ultimately, RiL managed to set up a website and fundraise for their cause in Europe, using the 'money to buy medicines for the people'. This spirit of solidarity and self-organizing enabled them to occupy the site for 100 days.

The protest initially had some positive impacts. UNHCR met and listened to RiL leaders and, as one told us, eventually 'secured the release of a few people [from detention]' (according to a protest leader), yet many were still left in the infamous Ain Zara camp. Some humanitarian charter flights also resumed after the meeting, although UNHCR were quick to point out that evacuation was not a right. Over time, relations between UNHCR and the refugees worsened. In a statement, the Refugee Agency made an implicit distinction between legitimate and illegitimate refugees, claiming that the 'protesters' were preventing 'vulnerable asylum seekers' from

⁵ Based on Rees' online research and participation in the RiL digital network; participant observation in the Geneva protest December 2022; and Ibreck's interview with a Refugees in Libya leader in Bologna, December 2023.

accessing vital services. Despite the non-violent nature of the sit-in, there were claims of violence that RiL disputed with evidence online, charging the agency with ‘misleading and false statements’ (Refugees in Libya 2021). Ultimately, as an RiL leader explained to us, ‘UNHCR closed their office and walked away. They claimed that they have halted their activities because we were violent and we were not registered. They denied us’. The protest was finally violently dispersed by police and militias on 10 January 2022, with protesters being beaten, shot at, and many held at Ain Zara detention centre, while their tents were burned. Although they did not have any formal evidence, it is clear that the refugees blamed UNHCR, at least in part, for the violence (Refugees in Libya 2022a,b).

UNHCR’s reluctance to learn from and be held accountable for prior actions surfaced vividly at the subsequent 2022 protest in Geneva. As the sit-in progressed, RiL leader David Yambio was invited to meet with Alex Tyler, Senior Liaison Officer for the UNHCR Middle East and North African Bureau, to discuss the movement’s demands (Refugees in Libya 2022b). After the meeting, Yambio observed that ‘[t]o our surprise, they say they know everything which is happening in Libya, which means that they are to be held accountable for their failures and for their refusal to protest the people’. The purpose of the protests, as one RiL leader put it, was to make UNHCR live up to its mandate—‘to wake them up, to put them in the space where they’re supposed to stand’.

2.3 Tunis⁶

Refugee protesters in Tunis repeated complaints previously raised in Cairo and Tripoli. Facing intolerable conditions, they staged a series of sit-ins outside the UNHCR office in Lac1, Tunis, beginning in 2022, and persisting on-and-off over more than two years at various nearby locations. In numerous testimonies, they described long delays and backlogs in providing interview dates and issuing refugee cards. A Sudanese refugee lamented, ‘[t]here’s no support, no donation, no food, no money, no place to live in’. Many of the refugees interviewed felt victimized by a system that not only failed to provide but also seemed to discriminate—claiming some nationalities received better treatment than others.

UNHCR’s initial response to the protests was a positive call for dialogue and an assertion of the ‘right of refugees and asylum seekers to demonstrate in a peaceful way and in line with national law’ (UNHCR 2022b). However, as the sit-ins persisted and grew, the agency turned to condemnation of the protesters (UNHCR 2023a), despite the deepening humanitarian crisis in Tunisia with surging violent attacks, hate speech, and racism against refugees (see Human Rights Watch 2023; Rees et al. 2023).

Once again, the protest was violently dispersed and the protesters suspected UNHCR of complicity in calling in the police. They criticized the organization’s failure to confront citizens’ and police violence against refugees. This claim is reinforced by UNHCR’s public statement, which accuses some refugees of violence, without attention to the unprovoked assaults upon them (UNHCR 2023a). A protest leader—who joined the sit-in, seeking protection after losing his job and home due to President Kais Saied’s racist anti-migrant speech on 21 February 2023 (Amnesty International 2023)—challenged this account. He estimated that over 250 people from ten nationalities were protesting by April 2023. When local people came to ‘humiliate’ and provoke the refugees, calling them names, a few refugees who had ‘no control’ responded, according to the protest leader. Shortly afterwards police intervened and forcefully broke up the demonstration. Refugees described the onslaught: ‘in ten minutes we lost everything’; ‘some were arrested; it was extremely cruel; we were tear gassed’; ‘they arrested more than 80 people ... they started kicking people ... and they put electric shock’. One admitted that some refugees damaged cars in the parking lot across the street from the protest site but argued that these mistakes were made in a situation that was like a ‘war’.

⁶ Based on Wesley’s intermittent ethnographic research at the Tunis protest site in March 2022, and April 2023, including 38 interviews and Ibreck and Wesley’s research in November–December 2022 and July 2023, including seven interviews with refugees and four with activists/lawyers responding to the protests.

Protesters spoke of their repeated appeals to UNHCR, and their perception that 'the organization does not care'. They accused UNHCR of delays in responding to urgent medical issues, including when a skin rash spread among the protestors in spring 2022—a situation eventually addressed by Médecins du Monde. Similarly, the deteriorating health of a protester went unnoticed for days before UNHCR finally intervened, despite numerous calls. A doctor eventually arrived, but instead of the expected ambulance, he took the refugee in his personal car, and the protester was later announced to have passed away. When a young girl was struck by a car in a hit-and-run accident near the protest site, UNHCR arranged to transport her to a hospital, yet medical services were slow to respond. 'It took them almost two hours to come to rescue us because they despise us', one protester said, voicing a common belief among the refugees that delays and inaction were part of a strategy to weaken their protest, in which UNHCR was implicated.

3. Lessons from the protests: towards networked accountability

The different protests documented above must be understood in relation to the contexts in which they occurred, with specific regional, national, and local dynamics. UNHCR is not a monolithic organization: field offices are compelled to function in the political contexts they find themselves in, and their staffing reflects local demographics. There are, however, many important commonalities that UNHCR can and must learn from. It is in our roles as both witnesses and editors of collective knowledges (Scharenberg 2023) that we collate the lessons from the protests below before offering a practical policy solution through the concept of 'networked accountability'. In so doing, we also draw on lessons from a second dimension of our fieldwork: a stakeholder workshop with legal practitioners and activists held in Tunis in December 2023. The workshop deepened our understanding of the pathways, or lack thereof, through which legal professionals and refugee rights advocates attempt to hold UNHCR accountable to its mandate and for complicity in human rights violations.

3.1 Lessons from the protests

To discern lessons from the protests, we collated and edited the collective knowledge of our research participants, identifying four overarching and overlapping themes: *Humanitarian failures*, *practices of discrimination*, *policing of the protests*, and *accountability and transparency failures*.

UNHCR's *humanitarian failures*, of different kinds, were frequently voiced by refugees as both cause for protest and in respect to declining conditions during the protests. A primary frustration among protesters was that the agency's services were inaccessible and inefficient, pertaining to long delays for interviews, issuing cards, and in the case of Tunisia and Libya, providing medical care. A research participant from our workshop claimed that, despite UNHCR services being free in principle, the processes were often corrupt, with bribes being accepted to prioritize asylum applications, in contrast with the agency's commitment to a 'zero-tolerance approach' to fraudulent acts (UNHCR 2013, 5). In addition, the agency stayed silent even the face of extreme violence, such as the raids in Gargaresh, Tripoli. As one protester put it, '[t]hey have a mandate which they are not respecting. They have a [humanitarian] space but they're not standing in it, so they need to stand'.

Related to UNHCR's broader patterns of humanitarian failures was a specific concern with *practices of discrimination*, especially as they pertain to race and nationality. On one level, protesters voiced a broader structural critique that, due to its state-centric tendencies, the agency reproduced a racist border regime (Refugees in Libya 2022c). More specifically, a feature of all the protests was the frequent claim that there was a broader racism in the host societies towards black, sub-Saharan refugees. As one research participant observed, because this racism permeated the host societies and UNHCR personnel to a large degree reflects local demographics, this racism was often reproduced in the agency. Protesters in Tunis and Cairo, for example, claimed there was persistent discrimination and that some nationalities received preferential treatment.

UNHCR's *policing of the protests* was widely condemned. Protesters consistently reported a lack of communication from the agency. When meetings occurred, they yielded few, if any,

meaningful concessions. Instead, officials often echoed the assumptions of the agency's controversial and since-replaced *Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas* (UNHCR 1997; replaced in 2009, see Crawford 2021). They frequently distinguished between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' refugees, claiming protesters were not 'persons of concern'. Protests were routinely conflated with violence, despite being overwhelmingly non-violent (e.g. *Refugees in Libya* 2021; UNHCR 2023a). Safety concerns were then cited to justify office closures, further undermining refugee protection and services. Most troublingly, the agency was accused of collaborating with local security forces to disperse protests, leading to deaths, detentions, and expulsions. In authoritarian contexts—and particularly in Libya, where militias dominate—such engagement predictably risks serious human rights violations. A Tunisian civil society activist described UNHCR's actions during the Tunis protests, including its apparent request for police intervention, as incompatible with a humanitarian response, calling it 'shameful'.

The protests reveal several *accountability and transparency failures* on the part of UNHCR. Given that 20 years have now passed, these are most apparent from the 2005 Cairo protest. The agency's failure to respond first to the traumatized survivors and second to the landmark ACHPR decision, which claimed that the organization asked the state for 'forceful intervention' to end the protests, are particularly troubling (ACHPR 2021, 36). There is little indication that UNHCR has taken responsibility or learned lessons, based on the claims of Sudanese and Eritrean interviewees and reports from human rights organizations (detailed above). These patterns of behaviour were affirmed during our workshop in Tunis, where an Egyptian lawyer detailed multiple accounts of collaboration between UNHCR and security services and explained that when they try to raise these issues with the local field office through formal channels, UNHCR shuts down communication with them or community leaders.

3.2 Avenues for accountability

Our discussion with lawyers confirmed the dire lack of avenues to pursue the spiralling complaints from refugees against UNHCR. A legal aid provider in Cairo emphasized how some UNHCR mistakes have put refugees at risk: 'We know that information that was at UNHCR makes its way to Egyptian national security in ways that relate to the targeting of refugees ... [but] there's no way to hold them accountable'. Two Egyptian lawyers echoed the complaints made by Eritrean protesters outside UNHCR in Cairo, observing that the agency has 'not done anything to fight these waves of deportation'. They even cited cases in which UNHCR actions increased protesters' vulnerability, leading to arrests, imprisonment, and incidents of violence within UNHCR offices and affiliated associations. They emphasize that the agency is fundamentally only accountable to states and not to either human rights actors or refugees. For instance, UNHCR officials have privately shared fears with one of the lawyers we interviewed that if they speak out about state violations, they will 'lose their diplomatic solution'. Indeed, this is indicative of the difficult ethical-political tightrope that the organization must walk, consciously undertaking acts of self-censorship in light of the ever-present possibility of having its operations suspended by states—as is the case with Libya. Yet legal experts point out that UNHCR's reluctance to denounce governments, and even their very presence, may provide an alibi for state violations, including in legal cases.

Based on our research findings and the principle that UNHCR should proactively uphold accountability as 'a virtue' (Daun 2020: 10), in what follows we suggest that the organization should take two steps in relation to the protests we investigated before going on to propose a new framework for accountability that it should adopt. The first step is specific and backwards looking: UNHCR needs to take accountability for past events. Once again and given the timeframe, at present this primarily pertains to the 2005 Cairo protests. The facts are clear now about the violence committed when the protest was dispersed on 29 December 2005 and the ACHPR decision has accepted that UNHCR called on the security services. Given these facts, the organization must first formally apologize for the role it played in the violence. We also suggest that UNHCR must commit to reparations for affected people, families and communities, in keeping with principles

of reparative justice. The second step we propose, is future oriented: the agency must undertake full and transparent investigations into violence at the protests in Tripoli and Tunis. Our fieldwork revealed that in both cases the refugees themselves suspected UNHCR of collaborating with security services to end the sit-ins, a fact that they have not clarified. Given the organization's history and testimony about their complicity with authorities that was revealed in our workshop, these accusations appear plausible. Thus, it is imperative that UNHCR undertake a full internal investigation and disseminate their findings in a transparent manner.

3.3 Towards networked accountability

To reduce the risk of protest and complicity in human rights violations, UNHCR must urgently transform its accountability framework. There are currently no legal pathways to accountability for the protection of refugee rights—with the untested exception of international courts—and there is also a lack of political instruments to 'impose accountability on the UNHCR for its actions vis-à-vis refugees' (see [Harrell-Bond 2008](#)). Nevertheless, it is well understood that there is a strong 'normative case' for holding UNHCR, like other humanitarian actors, accountable to human rights standards ([Pallis 2005](#): 872–3). We propose that the UNHCR develops and adopts what we term a 'networked accountability' approach, rooted in an awareness that the agency lacks the means and has limited authority to protect refugees; instead, collaborative forms of governance underpinned by relations of interdependence, trust and accountability are needed for effective and legitimate responses. This entails consulting with, and answering to, the plural authorities that hold legitimacy in the field of refugee rights and protections, including refugee-led organizations (RLOs), human rights lawyers and humanitarian NGOs—not only donor and host states. Building strong accountability relations with a network of non-state actors is essential to upholding its protection mandate.⁷

What we mean by 'networked accountability' is the development of informal and formal processes that provide refugees and stakeholders with mechanisms to enable dialogue assessment and feedback with UNHCR, as well as instruments to exact consequences, including punitive sanctions and reparative measures where violations occur.⁸ This is in keeping with the agency's pre-existing commitment to foster accountability relations with refugees by involving 'Affected People' in processes of consultation and decision-making ([UNHCR 2022a](#)). In February 2023, the agency organization made a promising step, committing to the recognition of RLOs, potentially signalling a shift in approach to include affected communities in policy conversations. While we welcome UNHCR's commitment to recognize and involve RLOs in policy processes as a positive move, there are still concerns about the scope of the definition and how meaningful it will be in practice (see [Harley 2023](#)). Consequently, we argue that the agency needs to go further. To ensure UNHCR's accountability to affected communities and stakeholders, the organization should institutionalize these relationships, embedding representatives of RLOs, NGOs, and human rights lawyers into formal its governance structures and decision-making processes. For example, UNHCR could appoint representatives from a network of RLO's, NGOs, and human rights lawyers to its Executive Committee and/or Standing Committee. We see the potential for a commitment on the part of UNHCR to 'networked accountability' to function as a counterweight to the organization's dependence on major donors and host states and to avert the current risks to refugee protesters.

⁷ There are examples of refugee-first approaches that UNHCR could learn from: Refugee Platform in Egypt is providing legal support to refugees rounded up in protests at UNHCR; Tunisian civil society groups mobilized to assist refugees at the sit-in in Tunis, including crowd-funding to provide them with food ([Rees et al., 2023](#)); CIAC in Italy adopted a solidarity approach with protesters outside their office, informing them on their efforts, and emphasizing that 'we are with them not against them' (CIAC representative, December 2023).

⁸ See [Lee and Ospina \(2022\)](#) for a theory of networked accountability processes in collaborative governance that informs our concept.

4. Conclusion

This reflection focuses on our fieldwork concerning urban refugee protests and their catastrophic endings to explain why UNHCR must urgently construct new relations and processes to build trust and accountability with refugees. It is antithetical to the organization's humanitarian mission to depict largely peaceful protests by vulnerable people as 'violent' or threatening and to rely on security or police forces in regimes where violations against migrants are rife. Admittedly, UNHCR is under pressure to uphold the principle of asylum in hostile environments in the wake of unprecedented funding cuts that present real challenges to its operational capabilities. However, in the face of these difficulties, we also see an opportunity to rethink how it fulfils its mandate. UNHCR has long been too state-centric in its orientations and overly accountable to its major donors (Crisp 2018). Our approach offers a new framework through which the agency might embed itself in civil society through accountability networks with affected parties and organizations committed to refugee solidarity and support.

In consequence, we propose that UNHCR adopt a 'networked accountability' approach. First, it must break with the security lens it applies to refugees' protests, instead adopting a refugee-first approach. Second, it should recognize that it owes accountability to a network of plural authorities that hold legitimacy in refugee protection and rights, including RLOs, human rights lawyers, and humanitarian NGOs. Third, when the organization is found to be implicated in human rights violations, it must respond according to principles of justice, truth-telling and reparations. Lastly, a policy shift towards networked accountability relations should go hand in hand with the steps to transform organizational norms and administrative cultures that impact negatively on the treatment of refugees and produce inexcusable forms of neglect and indignity, and may even contribute to physical and emotional harm. While protests might be disruptive, in the absence of other avenues for complaint and accountability, demonstrations are an understandable and legitimate tactic for refugees to adopt to expose the unliveable conditions of their existence and to call for action.

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Field Reflection