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Hesitant sharing, hesitant caring: How global and national policies on refugees and asylum seekers interact in the global South

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Abstract

The principle of responsibility sharing is anchored on the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the ethical duty of countries in the global North towards refugees and asylum seekers. There is a growing recognition, however, of a North–South impasse in responsibility sharing. With focus on the case of Egypt, this paper seeks to illustrate the interdependence of transnational factors relating to global humanitarian and development aid with national policies relating to refugees and asylum seekers. Despite the growing refugee crisis in Egypt, the financial resources the country receives dim in comparison to the large number of refugees the country hosts. We argue that the hesitancy of high-income countries to share responsibilities in the global refugee crisis, which is manifest in the limited and conditional allocation of resources, has ramifications on national policies in this host country. Weakened international solidarity, a situation of hesitant sharing, translates into hesitant caring, a situation of weakened social policy support to refugees and asylum seekers. Hesitant caring, we argue, is the downstream effect of the global reluctance to support refugees and asylum seekers. In the case of Egypt, we trace it in the form of an incongruence in the country's position towards international legal frameworks, restricting commitments to refugees and asylum seekers in some frameworks while not in others. This legislative (*de jure*) incongruence is also associated with unequal and weak (*de facto*) realization of care and protection.

Keywords Refugees, Asylum seekers, Egypt, Middle East, Social policies

Introduction

Responsibility-sharing is a core tenet of the international response to the global refugee crises (e.g. Owen, 2018; Coen, 2021). Under this tenet, high-income countries are to share the burden with low- and middle-income countries in supporting refugees. It is an ethical duty, outlined as an obligation under international law (Carens, 2013; Gibney, 2015, 2018). There is further incentive for high-income countries to partake in responsibility-sharing, which is to manage and abate fears of migrant spill over into their territories (Linos & Chachko, 2022). Despite its more recent media recurrence, the concept of responsibility sharing is as the old as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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(UNHCR). The growing global refugee crisis has highlighted the important role of transnational factors such as humanitarian and development aid as a response to the movement of large numbers of migrants and refugees (Lupieri and Doetter, 2020). Yet, financial allocations are unevenly distributed across refugee situations in host countries (UNHCR, 2023) and there is a growing agreement that responsibility sharing remains a “weak norm” (Coen, 2021) curtailed by ambiguities of interpretation that complicate holding states accountable. Egypt is a case in point.

Egypt’s experience as a lower middle-income host country is attracting a growing body of literature due to the increased refugee presence in the country. Existing literature focuses on national legal frameworks and gaps in service delivery (Habersky et al., 2023; Hetaba et al., 2020; ILO, 2022). Another strand of the literature attempts to develop models of refugee administration in the country along with other lower-income countries (Abdelaaty, 2021; Davis et al., 2017; Norman, 2016, 2019). Others investigate the marginalization of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in urban contexts (Grab-ska, 2006; Norman, 2024). There is limited research, however, on the interdependence of global arrangements and national legal and institutional frameworks for refugee integration in the country (e.g., Lupieri and Doetter, 2020), particularly in view of the principle of responsibility sharing and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees. This paper seeks to address this gap.

We contribute to this literature by aiming to elucidate the interdependence of global and national policies by offering the notion of hesitant sharing and hesitant caring. This notion aims to bridge the national and global migration policy spectrum. We argue that the limited resources a country receives in support of its refugee crisis constitutes a situation of a global hesitant responsibility sharing. In the case of Egypt, this hesitant sharing is manifest in a situation of funds narrowly earmarked and falling short of the needs. We demonstrate that the country’s policy framework constitutes a hesitant response of “caring” for refugees and asylum seekers crisis that is calibrated by the historical trajectory of the country in receiving different groups of migrants and international support. We conceptualize hesitant caring as going in opposite directions, granting benefits at one point and not at other points with a lack of consistency in response across different sectors. We show points of congruence and incongruence across the country’s international obligations, national policies (*de jure* provisions) and actual practices (*de facto* provisions). The analysis particularly focuses on policies pertaining to the provision of social services over the past decades along with the more recent legislative change with the issuance of the country’s first ever refugee law late in 2024 (Law 164). The provision of social service is a key instrument of social protection for this vulnerable group (Deacon & Nita, 2013). The incongruence in policies and provisions, we argue, constitutes the downstream effect of the global hesitancy towards responsibility sharing and the limited resources made available to the country.

The paper analyzes Egypt’s stance and ratification status of different agreements and how this is reflected in national policies and the country’s legal frameworks and practices, from a *de jure* and *de facto* perspective. From a *de jure* standpoint, the country has reservations on the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), acceded in 1981. Notwithstanding these reservations, Egypt has ratified different international treaties relevant to fulfilling refugees’ social, economic and political rights. We note that with the exception of the most recent legislation (Law 164 issued in December, 2024),

the Egyptian law has long subsumed refugees and asylum seekers under the category of foreigners/non-nationals, and offered differential benefits and access to services based on their country of origin. Generally, the restrictions on residence, work permits and renewal of passports *de facto* limited access to benefits. In the end, the cost of this hesitancy at different levels is borne by the refugees themselves, who have to interact with a complex system to access uneven and limited support. While some of these restrictions are addressed in the 2024 law, the increasing number of refugees and dwindling resources are likely to persist and exacerbate. The analysis in this paper is relevant for practitioners seeking to provide support to refugees in Egypt, in order to understand the policy context in which they operate and its interdependence on international support.

The research methodology for this case study relied on a desk review of Egypt's relevant laws and executive regulations and key informant interviews undertaken as part of a study commissioned by a group of UN organizations operating in Egypt. The desk review included international treaties and ratified agreements; national laws pertaining to refugee policies including education, health care, social insurance, social assistance (both in English and Arabic). The review also looked at primary policy documents such as reports by different involved entities. The study also relied on fourteen structured interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024. These were facilitated by UN partners and involved representatives from key governmental organizations (Ministries of Social Solidarity, Foreign Affairs, Health, Investment and Manpower); community-based organizations; international non-governmental organizations; and UN agencies. Interviews were primarily conducted in Arabic and focused on explaining the policies, regulations and implementation processes. While we do not include identification data in the analysis below, all interviewees knew that they were speaking on the record as representative of their entities. This has been a key study limitation as it did not allow for instances of critical reflection by respondents. Interviewing officials, particularly elite officials, commonly poses methodological challenges (Mikecz, 2012). This is further exacerbated by challenges relating to conducting research in this socio-political context (e.g., Wackenhut, 2018; Elgamri et al., 2024).

The paper is organized as follows. Following this introduction section, Sect. “[Context: the Refugee Crisis in Egypt and its Visibility](#)” provides an overview of the Egypt context and the situation of refugees and asylum seekers. Section “[Conceptual Framework: Hesitant Sharing and Hesitant Caring](#)” presents the key concept and mechanisms of responsibility sharing. Section “[Hesitant Sharing: International Community Support to the Refugee Crisis in Egypt](#)” shows data on international community support to the refugee crisis in Egypt. Section “[Hesitant Caring: The Incongruence in Egypt's position on refugee rights in international legal frameworks](#)” details the entitlements for this group under international conventions either ratified or acceded to by Egypt. Section “[Hesitant Caring: The Incongruence in De Jure and De Facto Provisions for Refugees and Asylum Seekers](#)” reviews the country's national policies and *de facto* practices for the provision of key services. The final section concludes the paper.

Context: the refugee crisis in Egypt and its visibility

Egypt has long been a transit and a destination country for refugees and asylum seekers (Andrade et al., 2021; Norman, 2016, 2017, 2019). The twentieth century witnessed waves of Armenians fleeing the 1915 genocide and Palestinians fleeing the Arab-Israeli

conflict (Davis et al., 2017) among others. The country received Palestinians following the 1948, 1956 and 1967 wars (Davis et al., 2017; El Abed, 2004). Egypt also hosted a large Sudanese community that has historically moved back and forth between the two countries; with an increased flow of refugees following the outbreak of the 1983 war in present-day South Sudan (Grabska, 2006) and the more recent political unrest in Sudan that started in 2023. Since the political turmoil in the region dubbed in the media as the “Arab Spring,” the country also received forced migrants from Syria, Libya and Yemen. In 2022, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimated that Egypt had more than 9 million non-nationals (IOM, 2022). In early 2025, UNHCR reported 902,700 registered refugees and asylum seekers from 58 nationalities.¹ The two largest refugee groups in the country are the Sudanese followed by the Syrians.

Egypt first signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR in 1954. The country later ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the subsequent 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees in 1981, with some reservations that we detail below. According to the MoU, the government of Egypt delegated UNHCR the responsibility to carry out the first process for accepting asylum seekers at Egyptian borders, or refugee status determination (RSD) (Hetaba et al., 2020). The RSD process is conducted on an individualized case-by-case basis (Habersky et al., 2023; Hetaba et al., 2020). Alternatively, in cases of mass influx from countries experiencing widespread political instability and conflict, all arrivals are accepted as refugees. This *prima facie* approach has been applied to Syrians and Yemenis (Habersky et al., 2023; Hetaba et al., 2020) and more recently to the Sudanese. Upon status determination, it is the role of national authorities to issue residence permits and allow access to different services as per ad-hoc agreements with UNHCR.

This historical arrangement of the role of UNHCR in RSD is in the process of being changed with Egypt 2024 first refugee law, which tasks a governmental entity with RSD, “in collaboration with UNHCR” (Article 2, Law 164/2024). This legislation also grants refugees the right to work (article 18), which is a major milestone given the previous arrangement where refugees were subsumed under the category of “non-nationals” with restrictions on employment. Another major change is the right to health care (article 21) and the right to basic education to refugee children (article 20), although the details of implementation were not announced at the time of writing this paper. These promises, as we show below, go beyond the reservations made by the country in 1981. Except for this most recent legislation, Egypt has long-offered differential benefits and access to services to refugees and asylum seekers based on their country of origin and its politics (Abdelaaty, 2021).

There are many reasons the situation of refugees and other forced migrants are less visible in Egypt compared to other countries in the region, such as Jordan and Turkey. First, Egypt does not have an encampment policy to spatially locate and govern this group. Most migrants live in urban areas among host populations, primarily in the capital Cairo, Giza and Alexandria (UNHCR, 2024a). Second, the aforementioned number of registered refugees and asylum seekers does not account for asylum seekers whose files have been closed/rejected by UNHCR but self-identify as refugees and continue to live in Egypt in precarious conditions (Abdel Aziz, 2017). Third, it is also important to

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/about-us/refugee-context-in-egypt>.

note that many never register with the UNHCR and live in the country as unregistered migrants or consider it as a transient stop (Abdel Aziz, 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interview, 2023). This contributes to a situation where those registered at UNHCR constitute a tiny fraction of forced migrants in the country.

Conceptual framework: hesitant sharing and hesitant caring

The analysis in this paper proposes a conceptual framework that seeks to bridge the globally defined responsibility sharing concept to national policies, particularly in relation to social policies and refugees' access to basic services. This framework seeks to span the gamut of the global and the national, aiming to capture the dynamics at both scales.

The concept of responsibility sharing is not new, though the term has gained recent currency in the media. The preamble of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention is squarely focused on the principle of international solidarity as central to national responsibility, acknowledging the "unduly heavy burdens on certain countries" (UN General Assembly, 1951:13). International law repeatedly highlights the ethical duty of high-income states to support low and middle-income states in sharing obligations towards refugees (Carens, 2013; Gibney, 2015, 2018). Responsibility sharing has been envisioned as the means to allow a predictable response during a refugee/migration emergency (Suhrke, 1998). Owen (2018) argues that the duty to provide asylum to refugees is not only a humanitarian duty of rescue but is a political obligation within the global regime of governance to which states uphold. These principles underpin the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, which remains the core normative framework. The Compact, though not legally binding (Article 4), highlights that pledges and contributions could take different forms, including financial, material and resettlement pathways (Article 18). The principle of responsibility sharing highlights the interdependent relationship between transnational factors relating to global humanitarian and development aid with national policies (Lupieri and Doetter, 2020).

International justice in the allocation of responsibility to refugees is a core ethical question, spurring a heated debate about the limits of the responsibility of countries to receive refugees both in the global North (e.g. Miller, 2016; Owen, 2016; Hoesch, 2018; Miller, 2016; Carens, 2013) and less so in global South (e.g., Martin et al., 2019). The overarching debate lies in the question on whether a country's duty be limited to its "fair" share as Miller (2016) makes the case, or should countries give priority to duties of justice over the fair distribution of refugee protection (Owen, 2016) and "pick up the slack" as others do not take their share. The inequalities in state burden sharing are most acute in countries in the global South. Gibney (2009:6) rightfully notes that refugees, the "least secure people on the globe," are primarily hosted in countries that have the fewest resources. The integrative abilities of these countries, particularly in terms GDP level and political stability, is greatly compromised by the mass influx of refugees. Martin et al. (2021) show the different types of responsibility sharing reflecting the views of policy makers, and differentiating between sharing responsibilities in receiving refugees and financing.

There is a growing agreement that responsibility sharing remains a "weak norm" (Coen, 2021) curtailed by ambiguities of interpretation that complicate holding states accountable. Ghezelbash (2020) unveils strategies that countries in the global North

adopt to avoid their international obligations towards receiving refugees by adopting an overly formalistic approach to interpreting international law and by a deliberate silence, or obfuscation of the matter. In financing, high-income countries in the global North are yet to hold up their end of the bargain, which is reflected in the inadequate support to most host countries (Martin et al., 2019). Linos and Chachko (2022) have been critical of how responsibility sharing is enacted in practice, referring to regressive arrangements that, they argue, constitute responsibility “dumping” not sharing.

Betts (2009) describes a North–South impasse in responsibility sharing, where countries in the global North have little incentive to cooperate in burden-sharing. These countries are motivated by a perceived relationship between their contributions to refugee protection and their wider interests in issues such as security, trade, foreign policy and peacebuilding (ibid.). As part of this impasse, countries in the global South are described as engaging in “refugee commodification” and “rent-seeking” to ensure the support of countries of the North (Freier et al., 2021; Tsourapas, 2019). Rygiel et al. (2016) argues that the influx of refugees into such countries is used as a foreign policy instrument to encourage/coerce international donors to provide financial resources into the host country in question. Tsourapas (2017) argues that countries in the global South engage in “migration diplomacy”, to reach the most benefit of the situation. Visibility and symbolic performance, rather than outcomes, remain a core strategy in migration diplomacy (Tsourapas, 2025).

In a context of uneven responsibility sharing, tasks related to refugees and asylum seekers in lower middle-income countries in the global South are often-times assumed by international organizations, specifically UNHCR (Micinski, 2022). Host states in the global South commonly do not have the resources or the capacity to respond to mass influxes of refugees (ibid.). This practice has historically given UNHCR the role of a ‘UN surrogate state’ (Slaughter & Crisp, 2009). In this arrangement, UNHCR is uniquely positioned as an implementing international organization and as a funding channel. Over the years, the organization has been subject to scathing criticisms for its “failure” to protect refugee rights (e.g., Stevens, 2006). In its defense, UNHCR, and any other international organization, has limited ability to address the magnitude of the sprawling protracted refugee crises globally (Slaughter & Crisp, 2009). In many instances, UNHCR performs several “quasi-government functions” (Kagan, 2011).

How responsibility sharing is down streamed at national migration policies, specifically social policies that are aimed at “caring” for refugees and asylum seekers, is less discussed in the literature. While there is ample literature discussing social policies affecting refugees in receiving countries in the global South (e.g. Hujo, 2010), the interdependence between the two realms remains gravely under-studied. This is central to an understanding of the interdependence of social policy in a global context. Given the role of international organizations, nation states with refugees and asylum seekers are part of dynamic interactions with various cross-border entities, international organization, creating interdependencies (Lupieri and Doetter, 2020). Salehyan and Savun (2024) highlight an inherent tension between refugee admissions and refugee integration policies, where countries tend to restrict benefits when admission numbers increase. Lupieri and Doetter (2020) argue, and we concur, that national state policies cannot be explained without the analysis of such global forces relating to international law and global donor support. The interdependence between transnational humanitarian and development

aid as a response to the movement of large numbers of migrants and refugees and national policies is complex (ibid.).

We contribute to this literature by offering the notion of hesitant sharing and hesitant caring. This notion aims to bridge the national and global migration policy spectrum. We argue that the hesitancy of high-income countries to share responsibilities in the global refugee crisis, which is manifest in the limited and conditional allocation of resources, has ramifications on national policies in host countries. Migration diplomacy (Tsourapas, 2017) remains a key mediator of the level of responsibility sharing, closely connected to interstate bargaining aiming for foreign policy gains. Short of a strong bargaining power, perhaps due to geographic distance from countries in the global North or a limited visibility of the refugee crisis, this leads to limited support to affected countries. Weakened international solidarity, a situation of “hesitant sharing,” translates into “hesitant caring,” a situation of weakened support to refugees and asylum seekers in host countries. We conceptualize hesitant caring as an inconsistency in supporting refugees and asylum seekers. It is clearly manifest in unequal and weak realization of care and protection at the national level, with barriers of access to social services and patchy provisions.

Hesitant sharing: international community support to the refugee crisis in Egypt

The high numbers of vulnerable non-nationals including refugees and asylum seekers poses a key challenge to Egypt due to the country’s limited financial and social service capacities. For the subset of refugees and asylum seekers, their increasing numbers have not translated into more bilateral or multilateral aid, leading to perpetual shortfalls in essential support and services.² Instead, over the past decade, UNHCR’s operations in Egypt have witnessed a declining funding ratio to total financial requirements, as illustrated in Figure (1). The actual expenses for UNHCR have consistently been below the required budget, alluding to a financing gap.

For Egypt, the increasing shortfalls in the financial resources available to support refugees and asylum seekers, coupled with the country’s socio-economic conditions, raises

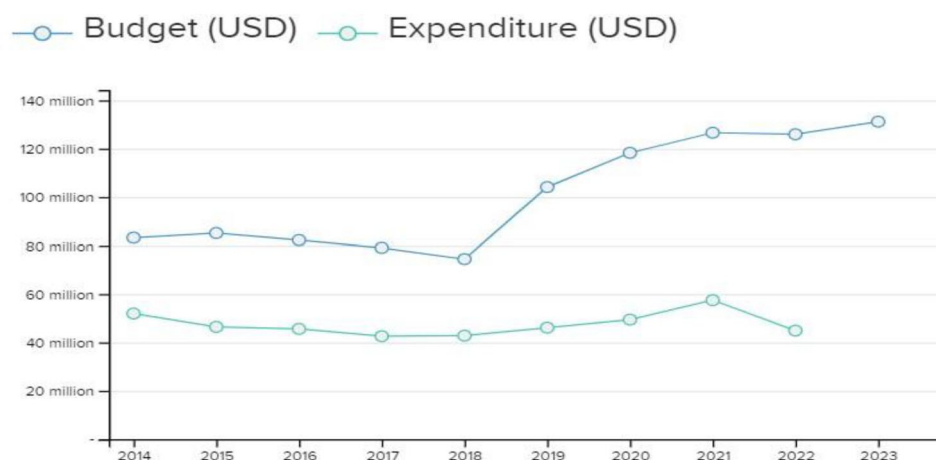


Fig. 1 UNHCR - Egypt: budget and expenditure trend. Budget is further explained on <https://reporting.unhcr.org/dashboards/budget-and-expenditure> accessed May 2024

² See various issues of UNHCR’s Fact Sheet-Egypt on: <https://www.unhcr.org/eg/resources/unhcr-egypt-documents>.

concern about the potential exacerbation of challenges already faced by vulnerable non-national and host populations. The waves of aid cuts, the major most recent by the world's biggest foreign aid donor, the United States, is anticipated to be reflected in further cuts in the data published in the coming years.

The financial resources received by Egypt to care for refugees and asylum seekers dim in comparison to those received by other countries in the region that have received flows of refugees in the aftermath of the Arab spring namely, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. As Figure (2) above demonstrates, from 2015 to 2022 the funding received by UNHCR in Egypt is the lowest when compared to all three countries, with UNHCR-Jordan being the highest recipient, followed by Lebanon and Turkey. In addition, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan also received the highest Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) for respective refugee situations in 2020–2021, with Turkey receiving the largest ODA package of USD 3,018 Million. Egypt's limited resources and the limited support it receives stand at odd with the experience of these countries. Like these countries, Egypt engages in migration diplomacy (Tsourapas, 2017). However, the limited visibility of the refugee issue and the country's restrictive approach to its borders (Abdelaaty, 2021) limit the outcome of such efforts.

Interviews with officials as part of this study highlight how they see the direct relationship between international responsibility sharing and the service offered by the government to refugees and asylum seekers. Some voiced criticism that the international community has long directed the support for refugees and asylum seekers to international organizations and the non-profit sector, while complaining about the quality of government services. According to one government official, this is a “myopic approach” as it leaves the burden on the government without support.

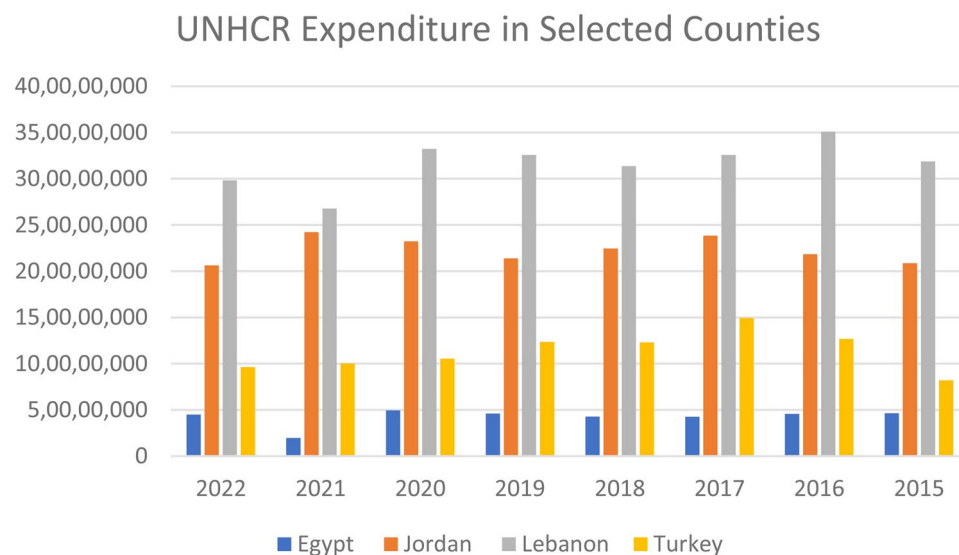


Fig. 2 UNHCR Expenditures: Comparison with other countries in the MENA. Source: compiled by authors from <https://reporting.unhcr.org/dashboards/budget-and-expenditure>

Table 1 Egypt's status regarding international and regional social protection instruments

Instrument	Egypt's Status	Date of signing/ Ratification/accession
Conventions relating to the Status of Refugees:		
The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee	Acceded	1981
Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees	Acceded	1981
	Acceded	1980
Convention on Regulating the Status of Refugees in the Arab Countries ¹	Signed but not ratified	1994
International Human Rights instruments:		
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	Ratified	1982
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)	Ratified	1967
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	Ratified	1990
UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)	Ratified	2008
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	Ratified	1981
ILO Conventions:		
The Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1962 (No. 118)	Ratified	1993*

Sources: compiled by authors from (ILO, n.d.; United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). * Egypt has only accepted branches (a) to (h)

¹Egypt is a member of the African Union (AU) Previously Organization of African Unity, (OAU)

Hesitant caring: the incongruence in Egypt's position on refugee rights in international legal frameworks

Awad (2017) rightfully notes that migration law is a collection of legal instruments situated at levels ascending from the subnational to the international levels. These instruments contribute to the global governance of international migration at the international and regional levels. In this section, we address these legal instruments.

Egypt is party to several key international conventions and agreements relating to refugees and asylum seekers. These conventions are divided into three groups for analysis. These include global and regional conventions relating to the status of refugees; universal human rights conventions with provisions on refugees and asylum seekers; and the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) specific to labour and social protection legislations that affect refugees and asylum seekers. Table 1 provides a snapshot of these conventions with Egypt's position in relation to each one in terms of ratification or accession³ versus being a signatory.

When Egypt ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1981, five reservations were made that are upheld to date and continue to shape national policies. The first relates to Article 12(1) (personal status). The country had reservations on this article noting that it contradicted with Article 25 of the Egyptian civil code which gives discretion to "the judge declares the applicable law in the case of persons without nationality". Egypt also had reservations on Articles 20 (rationing)⁴; Articles 22 (paragraph 1) (access to public education similar to nationals); Articles 23 (access to public relief and assistance);

³ "Accession" is the act whereby a state accepts the offer or the opportunity to become a party to a treaty already negotiated and signed by other states. It has the same legal effect as ratification. Accession usually occurs after the treaty has entered into force. In general, signing a Convention creates an obligation to refrain from acts that would defeat the object and purpose of the treaty. Ratification, however, legally binds a State to implement the Convention and/or the protocol associated to it, subject to valid reservations, understandings and declarations.

⁴ At the time of signing, ration cards were a key form of social assistance, providing subsidized food and non-food items.

and Articles 24 (labour legislation and social security). These reservations, it was noted on the document, stemmed from Egypt's preference to retain discretionary authority in granting refugees' access to social services and benefits on a case-by-case basis. As such, Egypt allows differential rather than equal access to refugees, determined by their country of origin. Abdelaaty (2021) highlights the discriminatory policy approach and argues that Egypt's policies towards refugees and asylum seekers are not ad-hoc but are a response to the countries relations to sending country and ethnic affinity.

It is important to understand the refugee context in 1981 that provided the pretext for these reservations. At the time, Egypt was regressing its long-held generous support to the key refugee group in the country, Palestinians (Abdelaaty, 2021). As a direct response to the tense relation with the Palestine Liberation Organization due to its stance towards Sadat's 1977 trip to Jerusalem, Egypt restricted its generous provisions of education and employment to this group (El-Abed 2009). The issue of Palestinians seems to have foreshadowed all decisions relating to refugees at the time.

The foreshadowing of the issue of Palestinian refugees, however, remained limited to the 1951 Convention ratification in 1981. For example, Egypt ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1982 with no reservations. Noticeably, Article 2 of the ICESCR specifically stipulates guaranteeing rights without discrimination of any kind including national or social origin. This Covenant particularly supports the rights of refugees and asylum seekers to work (Article 6); to social security (Article 9); to an adequate standard of living (Article 11); to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 12); and education (Article 13). Similarly, the reservations to the 1951 Convention are at odds with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), ratified by Egypt in 1967. The ICERD recognizes everyone's economic and social rights irrespective of racial, ethnic and geographical origins. Building on the ICESCR, it affirms the rights to work; right to public health; medical care; social security, social services, and education (Article 5).

The reservations on the 1951 Convention are also at odds with certain group-specific conventions that Egypt ratified. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which prohibits discrimination against minors on the basis of, among other things, their national origin or that of their parents or legal guardians (Article 2(1)). They are also at odds with Egypt's signatory status to UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was ratified by the country in 2008 with no reservations. The UNCRPD stresses obligations to grant all human rights - including the social, economic and cultural rights as outlined above - to persons with disability without discrimination. The reservations are also at odds with Egypt's signatory status to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which provides universal standards for the treatment of all women, including refugee and stateless women and girls. Finally, Egypt ratified ILO Convention No. 118 (ILO C118) in January 1993, which establishes the State's obligation towards equal treatment of nationals and non-nationals, normally contingent upon reciprocity by the latter's country of origin.⁵ The Convention highlights provisions are to be applicable to

⁵ The principle of reciprocity extends to every branch of social security for which the ratifying State has accepted obligations under the Convention. Egypt needs to guarantee equality of treatment, as regards these 8 branches, to any nationals from the other 36 State parties that have accepted any of these branches.

refugees and stateless persons, for whom equality of treatment must be secured without any condition of reciprocity (Article 10).

We conceptualize the incongruence between the position of Egypt vis-à-vis the different conventions as a form of the country's hesitant stance towards provisions for refugees and asylum seekers. The hesitancy is conceptualized as steps taken into opposite directions, with the reservations on the 1951 Refugee Convention being at odds with other ratified conventions that explicitly mentioned refugees. We put two lines of argument to explain this hesitant caring approach at the level of international agreement. The first is the foreshadowing of the Palestinian refugee situation and the oscillating political support of the government towards this group. Abdelaaty (2021) rightfully describes the stance of the Egyptian government to the support provided to this group as discriminatory based on foreign policy. Central to the argument of this paper, Palestinian refugees in Egypt received little to no international responsibility sharing (Abdelaaty, 2021). Palestinians are not part of the mandate of UNHCR. Their support is assigned to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which does not operate in Egypt. El-Abed (2009) argues that the Egyptian government deliberately eschewed UNRWA assistance in 1950, to discourage Palestinians from remaining in Egypt proper. However, this arrangement left the burden of supporting this group solely to the government of Egypt, and hence to its politics.

The second explanation to this hesitant caring relates to Egypt's social policy trajectory in the past decades. Barsoum (2017) argues that the country shifted social policy design paradigms, with shrinking of social welfare programs towards a more 'productive' neoliberal state role, borrowing from Rudra (2007). The relatively generous protective measures of the Nasser socialist era, experienced by both nationals and non-nationals (mainly Palestinian refugees) were followed by a growingly austere social policy approach. The implementation of structural adjustment policies in 1991 was a key milestone that was followed by more austerity measures.

A closer look at some of the countries with reservations made to the refugee convention show similar patterns. For example, Finland made reservations on Article 24 (social security), while the country is also signatory to the ICESCR. However, Egypt stands out for its unique refugee policy legacy, oscillating from high generosity to high austerity. This hesitancy, as we understand it, is also seen in the number of reservations made to the 1951 Convention on the one hand, and for the accession of multiple conventions that are at odds with these reservations on the other.

Hesitant caring: the incongruence in *de jure* and *de facto* provisions for refugees and asylum seekers

Egypt's incongruent position in relation to international convention is reflected in an incongruence observed between *de jure* and *de facto* provisions for refugees and asylum seekers. In this section, we highlight inconsistencies across such provisions considering Egypt's international obligations.

Egypt's Constitution of 2014 (amended in 2018) provides a strong basis for refugee support in the country, with reference to the rights of political refugees to asylum (Article 91);⁶ commitment to ratified agreement (Article 151); and a particular mention of

⁶ See the Egyptian Constitution in full at [https://sschr.gov.eg/en/the-egyptian-constitution/#::~:~:text=Article%20\(91\),of%20political%20refugees%20is%20prohibited](https://sschr.gov.eg/en/the-egyptian-constitution/#::~:~:text=Article%20(91),of%20political%20refugees%20is%20prohibited).

granting the force of law to all international human rights treaties that have been ratified (Article 93). Prior to issuance of the refugee law of December 2024, national legal frameworks rarely made explicit references to refugees and asylum seekers, being subsumed under the broad category of non-nationals, and in some instances granting preferential treatments to some refugee communities from countries that have special ties with Egypt.

In the following part, we discuss how each basic right is addressed in relation to the national and international frameworks, with particular focus on legal residence status, access to health care, access to affordable education and access to employment and social security. The incongruence between legal frameworks and between *de jure* and *de facto* provisions, we argue, constitutes a situation we describe as “hesitant caring” as reflection of the inherent contradictions we highlight.

Access to legal residence

There is clear congruence between Egypt's reservations with regards to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the regulations set out for non-refoulement, identification and travel documents. The reservation on Article 12(1) of the Convention (personal status) allows space for the discretionary role over who gets residence as noted above. Generally, Law 89/1960 defines three types of residence permits in Egypt: special residence permits (valid for ten years); ordinary residence permits (valid for five years); and temporary residence permit (valid for a year or up to five years based on the discretion of the Minister of Interiors). Refugees registered with the UNHCR and Palestinians with passports issued by the country are entitled to temporary residence permit of three years (based on Decree No. 8180 of 1996) (Hetaba et al., 2020). The legislation of 2024 (not in implementation phase yet) engages the government in RSD and confirms the right to non-refoulement to those with refugees and asylum seekers status (Article 11), although it leaves the implementation details to the executive bylaws, which were not announced at the time of writing this article.

There is, however, some incongruence between the *de jure* and the *de facto* arrangements. Issuing or renewing a residence permit has been known to be a prolonged bureaucratic and relatively expensive process (Hetaba et al., 2020), especially that renewal is only possible in Cairo (communication with UNHCR, 2023). Refugees must go through a cumbersome administrative process to receive 6-month residence permits, with the first step being assigned UNHCR cards. The process is a deterrent for some refugees, who opt to remain in the country without a valid residence permit (Hetaba et al., 2020). As a result, only 37 per cent of refugees had valid residence permits (UNHCR, 2020). This has been addressed by the 2024 legislation, which entitles refugees and asylum seekers for an identification document (Article 11) and a travel document (Article 12). It is hoped that this would address a real concern where only 9 per cent of refugees and asylum seekers possessed a valid passport in 2018 (ibid.).

Access to health care and affordable education

In access to health care, there is congruence from a *de jure* perspective between Egypt's ratification of the ICERD and the fact that refugees and asylum seekers have equal access to public health care facilities. This is stipulated as per two memoranda of understanding signed between Egypt and UNHCR (Interview with UNHCR, 2023). This right is

reaffirmed in the 2024 refugee law (article 21), although the details on implementation were not released at the time of writing this article. Egypt's Universal Health Insurance law (UHI, Law No. 2 of 2018)⁷ allows the Universal Health Insurance Authority to render its services to foreign residents and visitors to Egypt provided the condition of reciprocity (Article 59). There are, however, no clear stipulations detailing the inclusion process for refugees and asylum seekers into the system (ILO, 2023). The income vulnerability of refugees means that many will be partially or fully subsidized under the health insurance law to reduce their burden of paying health insurance contributions (ibid.). Conversely, the National Child Law (Law No. 12 of 1996 amended by Law No.126 of 2008)⁸ grants all children access health and social care services (Article 7-bis).

From a *de facto* perspective, however, refugees and asylum seekers are affected by the structural barriers to accessing health care in Egypt, where out of pocket spending is the norm (WHO, n.d.). Further, dark-skinned and non-Arab refugees commonly face discrimination, language barriers, and lack the understanding of regulations and refugee rights as they seek services (Hetaba et al., 2020; ILO, 2022). An estimated 61 per cent of refugees in Egypt prefer private health care facilities despite their higher costs (ILO, 2023).

In access to education, and from a *de jure* perspective, there is incongruence in Egypt's position on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, owing to contradictions in existing national laws and regulations on access to public education for foreigners, including refugees and asylum seekers. Ministerial Decree No 284/2014 states that foreign students can only be enrolled in private schools, but makes some exceptions to entry to public schools (those with UNHCR education grants along with some other groups including students from Sudan, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia; and Palestinian students whose parents are employed in /have retired from the government, public sector, or armed forces in Egypt as per Article 6). A survey shows that although 86 per cent of refugee children (ages 6–17 years) were attending schools, only 48 per cent of those attending went to public schools, while the remainder attended community schools (45 per cent) and private schools (8 per cent) (UNHCR, 2020). The 2024 refugee law affirms the right of refugee children to basic education but does not offer details on access to public schooling or the fee structure.

The selective admission into public schools, however, contradicts with the National Child Law (Law No. 126/2008). Article 1.2 of the law requires the State to provide “as a minimum guarantee the rights of the child, as stated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child and all other relevant international covenants enforced in Egypt.”

Access to employment and social security

There is *de jure* congruence between Egypt's international obligations and provisions with regards to ensuring that refugees are entitled to access to contributory social security. The Social Security Law (Law No. 148 of 2019), unified provisions for different groups of workers who were previously governed by different laws (Barsoum & Selwaness, 2022). The law eliminated the requirement of reciprocity present in the previous

⁷ As per this law, health facilities under the auspices of Ministry of Health and Population (MoPH) are to be transferred to the newly established General Authority for Health Care (GAHC). The Law will be implemented gradually over the course of 15 years.

⁸ See the National Child Law in full at <https://www.warnathgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Egypt-Child-Law-2008.pdf>.

legislation (Law 79/1975) to comply with international obligations. Hence, non-nationals can enroll in social insurance and enjoy rights and entitlements on an equal footing to Egyptians (National Organization for Social Insurance, interview, 2023).

From a *de facto* perspective, access to work permit, a precursor to joining social security, is very difficult. Refugees are subsumed under the larger category of “non-nationals” and face many restrictions to get work permits (Ministerial Decree No. 146 of 2019). Work permits are issued for one year or less for an annually increasing fee. These requirements aside, the Decree also sets a cap on the number of foreigners working in any economic institution (not to exceed 10 per cent of total number of insured Egyptian workers). Other restrictions limit hiring foreigners to recognized licensing, higher skills, and training capacity to national co-workers (Articles 6). The restrictive approach to granting refugees the right to work is highly prevalent in other countries (ILO, 2021) for fear of creating labor market distortions (*ibid.*). It is still unclear how the statement in the 2024 refugee law on the right to work (article 18 on wage work and article 19 on self-employment) will be implemented and what steps will be required of a refugee to obtain a work permit.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In the midst of overlapping and intersecting political crises characterizing the Middle East region, Egypt is facing the full brunt of an intense refugee crisis. Yet, its role as a host country is underplayed by a lack of commitment, or hesitant sharing, from high-income countries or powerful economic blocs to support the country's refugee burden. The first and foremost tool of responsibility sharing is to finance humanitarian and development assistance (Martin et al., 2019). With the continuing shortfall in financing of the refugees and asylum seekers crisis in Egypt, the country is yet to receive the global attention commensurate to its burden as a host country. In a context of tightening economic situation and limited resources, Egypt cannot effectively respond to the increasing number of forced migrants without international support. To the international community, the refugee crisis in Egypt is rendered ‘invisible’ by important factors relating to the spatial dispersion of forced migrants and the non-obligatory registration with UNHCR. As the numbers show, those registered with UNHCR constitute almost 10% of the figures shared by IOM (2022).

Our argument is that the two processes of hesitant sharing and hesitant caring are interdependent. Lupieri and Doetter (2020) made a similar argument about Jordan. The hesitant sharing of limited resources the country receives, we argue, is down streamed at the national level in an incongruence between legal frameworks governing refugees and asylum seekers and between *de jure* and *de facto* provisions. This incongruence constitutes a situation of hesitant caring, because of the inherent contradictions we highlight. This is also reflected in the incongruence in the position of Egypt vis-à-vis the different conventions in the provision for refugees and asylum seekers. We also show that the impact of the reservations Egypt made on the refugee convention in 1981 on national law has been variable. In the case of public relief and assistance and access to rationing, all non-nationals are excluded. However, access to public schools has been reserved for certain Arab nationalities regardless of whether they were migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. In addition, existing *de facto* provisions, including the cumbersome procedures to obtain residence permits; passport renewal; or work permits pose challenges.

While Egypt has historically adopted an approach of delegation and discrimination towards refugees and asylum seekers (Abdelaaty, 2021), the regulation of 2024 could potentially herald a new era of refugee policies in the country. Despite the criticisms to the 2024 regulation, the benefit of this Egypt's first ever refugee law is multifold. First, it acknowledges the specificity of refugees and asylum seekers as group, rather than the long-held approach of subsuming them within the larger category of "non-nationals". Second, it explicitly promised the provision of rights related to non-refoulement, health care, the right to work, and access to basic education. The implementation is yet to test the viability of these promises. Third, it affirms the government's ownership of the process of refugee status determination, rather than limiting its task to implementation of the outcome of this process. This does not negate concerns related to security considerations and the deterrence logic.

The specificity of the case of Egypt, however, does not negate the generalizability of the argument. The interdependence between global and national policies in relation to refugees and asylum seekers is real and aptly exemplified in the situation of Egypt as it has been shown elsewhere (e.g., Lupieri and Doetter, 2020). The hesitant burden sharing on the side of the global community is down streamed in a situation of hesitant caring, where refugees and asylum seekers pay the price of incongruent policies that doors of support that are half open.

Author contributions

GB wrote the main components of the manuscript text and the conceptual framework. AA provided support on the analysis of policies and legal documents. Both authors participated in data collection.

Funding

Open access funding provided by The Science, Technology & Innovation Funding Authority (STDF) in cooperation with The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB).

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 17 October 2025 / Accepted: 13 March 2026

Published online: 07 April 2026

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