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Refugia – a reflection five years on

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Abstract

Refugia: Radical Solutions to Mass Displacement was first published in English by Routledge in 2020. That short book was conceived as a challenge to the conventional arguments of the time, which, we thought, gravely underestimated the gravity, magnitude, and increasing salience of mass displacement caused particularly by conflict, persecution, and other factors. At the same time, advocates for refugees and many scholars misjudged the extent of the shift to the populist right that was already evident in many receiving countries, a shift that has accelerated and resulted in the increasingly harsh treatment of refugees, asylum-seekers, and irregular migrants. We proposed an innovative solution – a transnational network of many *refugiums*, collectively described as *Refugia*, where, alongside existing nation-states, displaced populations could develop their own self-organised and self-governed polities. Several responses to this idea were sceptical, as was only to be expected, but we had a good reception in the Global South, a Turkish translation, and some useful critiques, most of which are posted at this URL: https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/the-refugia-project. This Working Paper comprises the English version of the Afterword to a French edition, to be published five years after the original edition. We review the continuing deterioration of the global landscape, including the impact of COVID-19, the increasing restrictiveness of national immigration policies, and the extensive conflicts driving migration. The responses by refugees and their supporters are also discussed, including the use of digital networks, the rise of refugee-led organisations, the development of cities and universities of sanctuary, and the emergence of nascent *Refugia*-like polities. We continue to affirm the relevance of radical ideas, such as *Refugia*, and briefly suggest ways in which they might develop.

Keywords: *Refugia*, mass displacement, conflict-induced migration, restrictive immigration policies, utopian thinking about displacement, refugee-led organisations

Introduction

Five years ago, we published *Refugia* as a provocation, an act of radical imagination. We sought to jolt scholars and activists into a different kind of response to the substantial shifts in the spread, volume and character of displacement. Our intention was to explore the future possibilities for self-governing, transnational refugee communities amid the growing global refugee crisis[1]. At the time, we were optimistic about the potential for new, more inclusive, and sustainable approaches to forced migration. We were hopeful that by 2030, we might see the emergence of transformative initiatives like *Refugia* – a concept of flexible, self-organising spaces for displaced populations, that could work alongside traditional nation-states and international governance structures.

The French-language edition of this book[2] comes at another critical juncture, a time when the global refugee and migration landscape is deeply altered. What seemed, in 2019, to be an evolving situation now feels like a harrowing reality, shaped not only by migration crises but also by the rise of nationalism, the decline of asylum, and geopolitical conflicts that have displaced millions. A decade has passed since the 2015-2016 migration upheavals, which forced millions to flee violence, political persecution, and environmental degradation, and which prompted us to write the book. Those upheavals, though still fresh in our collective memory, turned out to be just the beginning of a much broader and more enduring transformation in global mobility. Over the last five years, the world has witnessed a series of political, social, and economic shocks that have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of migration, refugee rights, and the politics of asylum.

As we consider these new developments, we are prompted to ask: What have we learned in the last five years? How have these changes influenced the path forward for transnational refugee communities, and what does the future hold for the principles we outlined in *Refugia*?

Global migration: a deteriorating landscape

Over the past five years the deteriorating landscape for displaced people has been marked by at least four profound and sometimes interrelated developments – the impact of COVID-19, the rise of restrictive immigration policies, the increase in displacement arising from war and persecution, and the attempts by many states to 'offshore' their international obligations to refugees and forcibly to deport those seeking asylum and residence rights. Profound changes in climatic conditions worldwide and the concomitant increasing incidence of extreme weather conditions are the disturbing backdrop to these four developments. Climate change can contribute to complex emergencies that compound the already adverse situations faced by refugees and migrants.

The impact of COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic, which, by chance, coincided with the initial launch of *Refugia*, had a deep effect on migration flows. Many borders were closed, refugee camps were placed in lockdown, and entire regions became immobilised due to strict quarantine protocols. COVID-19 not only exacerbated existing vulnerabilities for migrants and refugees but also revealed the complex intersection of public health and migration management, showing how pandemics could further restrict the mobility of already marginalised groups. Some worried that the pandemic augured the end of global mobility altogether (Gamlen 2020), but in the event, after what turned out to be a testing period of immobility, international migration proved resilient,

not least since the forces that drive it in terms of global inequalities and injustice are so heavily ingrained.

The rise of restrictive national policies

Many states that once prided themselves on relatively liberal and pragmatic refugee policies have shifted dramatically towards more restrictive immigration practices and the abandonment of the principle of collective responsibility. These trends, fuelled by rising populism and the political ascendancy of right-wing nationalist leaders, have been accompanied by growing hostility towards refugees and migrants, especially undocumented arrivals and overstayers.

Regionally supported asylum systems, once viewed as a bastion of protection for those fleeing violence, have faced numerous setbacks. For example, the EU's hasty suspension of asylum procedures for Syrians after the ousting of Bashar al-Assad further undermined trust in international protection systems. National governments are increasingly using bureaucratic hurdles and militarised policies to limit asylum, leaving displaced individuals vulnerable and without options. Within Europe, the long-standing hostility towards migrants in Hungary was duplicated by the restrictions enacted by the incoming government of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni (who followed in the footsteps of previous right-oriented Italian governments). Countries like Germany, France, and the UK have increasingly hardened their border policies, enacted stricter immigration controls, and curtailed the free movement of people within the EU. Even the Nordic countries, long considered liberal, have joined the 'exclusion club'. For example, Denmark's Social Democratic prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, announced a shift to a 'zero refugee' policy in 2021, while Norway has strengthened its involuntary returns policy (Tronstad et al 2025). The re-election of President Trump led to a dramatic increase in immigration enforcement measures in the US, with nearly 23,000 arrests and 18,000 deportations in February 2025 alone (Sun and McCann 2025). To mass arrests and deportations should be added other pernicious measures: among them a ban on refugee resettlement, offshore detention, and, more broadly, closer relations with Russia and other authoritarian states that disregard and undermine humanitarian norms and the whole concept of international law.

Displacement from warfare and targeted attacks

As the gateways for refugees are closing, the world is witnessing a series of violent geopolitical upheavals with devastating consequences for human mobility: the world is once again at war (Tisdall 2025). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused millions to flee their homes, generating Europe's largest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Most of the Palestinian population of 2.1 million in Gaza has been displaced – often many times – as a result of Israeli bombing and shelling; there has also been significant displacement in the West Bank and Lebanon as a result of Israeli attacks. These two violent upheavals have tended to eclipse many other wars and mass displacement in press coverage and public consciousness. The conflict in Sudan has displaced millions. According to the UNCHR, after years of war, an astonishing 13 million people have fled their homes, with almost 4 million crossing into neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2025). The response on the part of rich, powerful countries to this humanitarian catastrophe has been muted. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, prolonged and continuing conflict – recently exacerbated by Rwandan forces invading Goma – has displaced about 7 million people over the last decade. To these disturbing cases have to be added ongoing conflict in Ethiopia, particularly in Tigray, and potentially with Eritrea; extreme insecurity across the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad; the debilitating conflict in Yemen that has sucked in a range of regional and global actors; ongoing challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan; continuing concern about Venezuelans departing to Colombia; and pervasive gang violence in Haiti and Mexico. Moreover, it is not just generalised warfare, but targeted attacks

that often precipitate forced movement – particularly in Myanmar, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gaza. In all, these events and their repercussions have tested the international refugee system and have made even clearer the limitations of existing frameworks (The New Humanitarian 2025; IRC 2024).

Offshoring and deporting

One particularly disturbing trend over the last five years has been the rise of the 'offshoring' of asylum processing, with states increasingly outsourcing their asylum responsibilities to countries in the Global South or even to private entities. Policies such as the UK's controversial Rwanda asylum scheme, which sought to relocate refugees to third countries, have gained momentum as a 'solution' to curbing migration. These practices are becoming normalised in international migration management despite widespread criticism for their inhumanity and violation of refugee rights. In October 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen suggested that the EU could learn from the Italian policy of processing migrants offshore in Albania, while new proposals would be presented by the Commission to increase the deportations of migrants (ECRE 2025).

Deportations have also increased from many countries since the immobility caused by COVID-19 restrictions. For example, the spokesperson for South Africa's Home Affairs department boasted that its Border Management Agency had deported and arrested 410,332 people at the border in just four months (du Plessis 2024). Dramatic as this was, the international headlines were grabbed by incoming President Trump's wild promises to deport between 10 and 20 million undocumented US residents. Although such a scale of deportation will face many practical and legal difficulties, the rhetorical force of his pronouncements helped his campaign for re-election and are prompting other governments to pursue similar approaches (Robertson and Manta 2025).

Like mass deportation, the trends in offshoring from countries in the Global North have been replicated by governments in the Global South, in some cases seeking to offload the displaced within their borders. Bangladesh's treatment of Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar in large numbers is a disturbing example. Bhasan Char is a low-lying, flood- and cyclone-prone island off mainland Bangladesh. Since around 2020, nearly 37,000 Rohingya refugees[3] from Myanmar have been placed here by the Bangladesh authorities in a bid to take them away from the overcrowded and desperate camps in Cox's Bazar, near the border with Myanmar, which accommodates some 1.3 million refugees (UNHCR 2024; Rahman 2025). Bhasan Char could be seen in some ways as a warped realisation of the island-based visions of some of the billionaire philanthropists we describe in Chapter 3 of the book, whose proposals emerged in the wake of the 2015–16 migration upheaval. Some of our critics would indeed claim that *Refugia* would turn out this way. But to reaffirm our position, we are absolutely not looking for the establishment of a single territory on which to 'dump' refugees; rather we seek to evoke a transglobal archipelago linking many territories across the world both in thought and in practice. In effect, we advocate a set-up that would consolidate transnational resilience – an enduring and evolving means of living that draws its energy and strength from the transnational practices of refugees and displaced people.

Responses and changing dynamics

Despite the many setbacks occasioned by a deteriorating global landscape, some positive trends have emerged, and we remain confident that the core vision of *Refugia* is still relevant and credible. We point particularly to the increased capacity of refugees to use digital networks and

to self-organise, as well as the increasing activities of those acting in solidarity with refugees, particularly in the cities and universities of sanctuary. We also observe the fate and promise of several 'proto-*refugiums*', as we call them.

The emergence of digital refugee networks

With all the usual caveats about surveillance and manipulation by the big tech companies, digital technology has played a transformative role in the mobility and organisation of refugee, migrant and diaspora communities. People on the move make impressive use of GPS technology, increasing their capacities to anticipate danger, plan new routes, connect with family and communities at home and in their planned destinations, and liaise with sympathetic citizens in host settings (Eluère 2024). As well as for functions like sending remittances, refugee networks have turned to digital platforms to mobilise resources, share information, and advocate for their rights. For example, WhatsApp groups enable refugees to use digital tools to take control of their circumstances, particularly in regions where state infrastructure is weak or non-existent. Among Somalis, this use of digital technology has enabled a form of 'platform kinship' (Norman 2024), where online networks function as substitutes for state-based social welfare systems and even some functions of governance and justice – in the latter case, exclusion from a digital group provides a sanction for infraction and dereliction. In the Somali case this has been dubbed a 'WhatsAppocracy' (Economist 2025a).

The rise of refugee-led organisations and autonomous refugee protest

Relatedly, in recent years refugee-led organisations (RLOs) have become increasingly visible and influential – rather more so than when we wrote the first edition of our book. These organisations often bridge the gap between displaced people and the formal humanitarian structures that are often slower than RLOs to respond. Although some RLOs are said to have a 'democracy deficit', with self-appointed leaderships, they are closer to the people they seek to represent than either the international agencies or international non-governmental organisations, which are constrained by national policies, pre-existing agendas and cultural blindness. To provide some indication of the extent of self-organisation among displacees, a 2022 study of RLOs in East Africa identified 138 in Kenya, 63 in Uganda, 42 in Tanzania, and 61 in Ethiopia (Kara et al 2022). Many of these groups now engage with international bodies like UNHCR, forming partnerships that reflect the growing importance of refugees in the discourse surrounding migration. Such engagement carries the risk of co-optation – and those RLOs with a more critical agenda may be frozen out of funding and other engagement altogether. Hence we should not exaggerate the extent to which RLOs provide an alternative mode of representation. Despite these caveats, RLOs are becoming part of the refugee assistance architecture, as well as marking a welcome trend summed up in the phrase 'nothing about us without us' (see Chapter 4 in the book for further discussion).

More direct and autonomous action by refugees may be observed in protests against their conditions. For example, in Agadez, Niger, refugees from East Africa, together with others from Eritrea, Chad, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, protested for over 200 days in 2024-25 against conditions they claimed inhumane. According to an NGO report, 'Their demands are simple: safety, dignity, and the opportunity to resettle. But their pleas have, they believe, been met not with protection, but with repression' (AOAV 2025). Other notable protests have been initiated by Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and West African migrants and refugees in Tunisia (Sangita 2024; Seghaier 2024). Extensive protests (including sit-ins, marches, and hunger strikes) have taken place in the detention camps in Libya. Demands have included access to healthcare, better food and opportunities to leave Libya other than through forcible deportations. Cuttitta (2024: 16) notes that migrant protests in Libya have spread to solidarity actors 'across the

continents, thus creating transnational networks of solidarity flows that challenge the externalised European border regime and support the freedom of movement. Thus, solidarity develops by stretching over territories and becoming transnational and multi-directional'. Here we see concrete expression of the figure of the *solidarian* (see Chapters 4 and 5 in the book).

Cities and universities of sanctuary

The idea of sanctuary has deep roots – first ancient Greek and Roman temples, then churches, offered protection for those avoiding persecution or injustice. A sanctuary movement centred on cities grew up from the 1980s in the US, and in the UK, among other places, from 2005. By December 2023, there were more than 170 sanctuary cities and counties in the US and some 15 in the UK. Kaufmann et al (2022) found that 35 out of the 95 cities surveyed in continental Europe had some provision for the support of irregular migrants, though they had not necessarily adopted the expression 'sanctuary city'. As we noted in the first edition of the book, despite their positive role in integrating precarious migrants, such municipal initiatives often irritate national governments, particularly those of an authoritarian bent, which have sought to undermine them by de-funding, among other damaging practices (Mallet-Garcia and Garcia 2025).

Another important example of solidarity has come from academic institutions around the world. Universities of Sanctuary – there are 38 in the UK alone – are an emerging global movement through which universities provide support, safe spaces, and integration opportunities for refugees and displaced individuals. These initiatives help to foster both educational opportunities for refugees and broader social inclusion, thereby demonstrating the potential for transnational, non-state actors to build the kind of *Refugia*-like environments we envisioned in our book. Equally importantly, these sanctuary initiatives operate across different ethnicities and nationalities, helping to foster the kind of cross-national and cross-ethnic solidarities that we see as essential for the emergence of a *Refugia*-like polity.

Refugia-like polities in practice

In the first edition of the book, we looked at several examples of *Refugia*-like communities, which we designated 'proto-*refugiums*'. However, several of these have faced severe setbacks since we wrote our text more than five years ago. One such example is the refugee accommodation set-up in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, which initially offered a glimpse of what transnational solidarity and assistance for displaced populations might look like (see Chapter 4 in the book). By January 2023, the number of registered Syrian refugees in the Bekaa stood at nearly 319,000, many of them self-organised into micro- and medium-sized communities[4]. However, Israel's bombing during the course of the recent conflict in the region severely undermined this set-up, showing just how fragile these proto-*refugiums* can be in the face of military violence and political instability. This set-back aside, three other examples, although far from perfect, offer valuable lessons for the potential of *Refugia*-like structures.

One such is the Tibetan case, supported by the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in India. Some critiques of the *Refugia* idea suggest that it overlooks cultural heritage in favour of a syncretic identity, but the Tibetan experience seems to present a counterexample of how a diaspora community can navigate both self-governance and complex relations with host countries. While it has been criticised for authoritarian tendencies, the CTA's leadership in areas of education, culture, and advocacy, combined with the continued presence of Tibetan refugees in India, exemplifies a form of governance that operates beyond traditional national borders. The authors of a recent assessment are usefully critical of some aspects of our notion of *Refugia*, but they also argue that the Tibetan case 'share[s] similarities

with a vision of *Refugia*, which aims to increase refugees' agency and end mass displacement through a network of autonomous places' (Frilund and Wangdu 2024: 84).

We can also point to the example of Rojava in northeastern Syria, which draws on anarchist principles of self-organisation, and which has welcomed significant numbers of displaced people of varying ethnicity, religion, and culture. The Syrian Kurdish-led autonomous region of Rojava (currently known formally as the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria or AANES) is another example of a self-governing polity formed in the midst of conflict (Knapp et al 2016; Dirik 2022; Finley 2025). Rojava's vision of self-governance, with its promise of a democratic, confederal, multi-ethnic political structure as well as of gender and ethnic equality, has been severely undermined by repeated military interventions, including from forces backed by Turkey and the Assad regime – though at times the AANES reached an uneasy accommodation with the latter. After the overthrow of Assad, the Kurdish-led militias, known as the People's Defence Units (the YPG) and Women's Defence Units (the YPJ), came under pressure from the new regime in Damascus to be absorbed into Syria's national armed forces. Furthermore, the Autonomous Administration had to make compromises with the US and there have been US troops present in the region; the roots of this relationship lie with US air support for the Kurdish militia efforts to rid northeast Syria of Islamic State (IS) groups. The polity remained under threat from IS cells seeking to free 20,000 of its members and sympathisers tenuously held in Al Hawl camp, guarded by the YPG (Averre 2025).

In the face of this persistent military aggression and political instability, the Autonomous Administration has managed to endure for over a decade. The AANES demonstrates how a self-governing community can stay the course, even when facing external threats and having to make internal compromises. At the time of writing, the Rojava experiment remains resilient, although weakened. Its prospects seemed more uncertain after Abdullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned leader of the Turkey-based PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party), made a surprising call: for the insurgent organisation – to which the militias in AANES are closely aligned – to lay down its weapons and to effect a ceasefire in its war with Turkish government forces (Rodgers 2025; Economist 2025b)[5]. Shortly afterwards, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which include the YPG/YPJ, seemed to agree to merge with Syrian government forces; yet the AANES more broadly appeared set against the new regime (Economist 2025c, 2025d, Gritten and Sinjab 2025). While the situation remained confused, precarious and tense, not least in the wake of continuing attacks by Turkey and uncertain relations with the new Syrian regime, the example of Rojava/AANES provides key insights into the sheer endurance required to maintain a *Refugia*-like polity in very hostile and challenging environments.

Further positive examples in an otherwise generally desolate landscape are the mutual aid organisations that have emerged in war-torn Sudan over the last few years (Shabaka 2024). Mutual aid groups in Sudan take a variety of organisational forms, including local community-based initiatives, women's groups, student groups, and the 'Emergency Response Rooms' (ERRs), which have attracted international attention.[6] Drawing on local traditions of mutual aid, the ERRs grew out of earlier grassroots configurations such as the Neighbourhood Committees (NCs) formed to protest against the dictatorship of Omar El-Bashir and the Resistance Committees (RCs) that were key in the popular revolution of December 2018, which eventually led to the downfall of Bashir in 2019. Four years later, following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 between different factions of the Sudanese military – principally the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – the NCs and RCs rapidly shifted to delivering humanitarian services as 'Emergency Response Rooms', of which there were some 700 by 2024. Women's 'Response Rooms' were also established in some areas of the country, particularly addressing sexual violence perpetrated by all sides of the conflict (Emad 2025). The ERRs claimed to reach several million displaced and destitute people, with the strong support of parts of the

Sudanese diaspora. For example, through the Sudan Solidarity Collective in Canada, diasporans linked with mutual aid groups in Sudan, initially for relief work and later to support the ERRs. Mutual aid groups have also assisted with evacuations from dangerous areas, helping both internally displaced people and refugees to retrieve or replace documents lost during the violent upheavals. Although distrusted and actively targeted by the conflict parties as 'political' actors, mutual aid groups like the ERRs have established decentralised, grassroots-led democratic networks focussing on meeting local humanitarian needs. Like the Somali online groups mentioned above, they have taken on quasi-state functions in the absence of a functioning state – or the presence of a predatory one.

Despite being increasingly recognised internationally, the future of the ERRs became uncertain as they faced violence and deprivation of funding, brought about not least by Trump's evisceration of USAID. As one observer noted, 'despite increased recognition for the groups – topped off by a Nobel Peace Prize nomination – volunteers have faced repeated abuse by the army and the RSF, as well as crippling underfunding that now threatens their very survival' (Nasir and Emad 2025). The ERRs nevertheless remain an inspiring example of autonomous organisation among displaced people in the face of extreme adversity.

Looking ahead: what's next for *Refugia*?

While the challenges ahead may seem daunting, we argue that the principles of *Refugia* remain as important and relevant as ever. As 2030 approaches, the creation of transnational, self-governing communities for displaced people -- whether in a *Refugia*-like entity or in some other form – remains a credible and desirable objective, we suggest. The lessons from thinking through *Refugia* may help inform future approaches to forced migration, against the background of the complex reality of displacement and the need for more humane, cooperative, and sustainable approaches.

The world is undoubtedly a more hostile place than in 2019, when we finished writing the first edition of the book. The landscape of global migration has become increasingly restrictive and fraught with uncertainty. Those who hoped for more compassionate border policies and more meaningful refugee protection have had to face a harsher reality. The situation for those attempting to traverse dangerous migration routes, such as the Central Mediterranean and the Darién Gap in south-central America, has greatly deteriorated. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was forced to cease its rescue operations in the Mediterranean due to hostile Italian policies, demonstrating the growing difficulty humanitarian organisations face in providing assistance under increasingly restrictive immigration regimes. The refusal of European governments to uphold their moral and legal obligations to rescue people at sea has highlighted the breakdown of international solidarity more generally.

There are similar threats to sanctuary cities, which have represented a hopeful model for integrating migrants into urban life. Now they too are increasingly under threat from populist leaders. The Trump administration's attempts to roll back sanctuary policies in the US have been mirrored by similar movements in Europe. Despite this, grassroots movements continue to push back, showing that solidarity between citizens and refugees remains strong, even in the face of rising political opposition.

Another hopeful development is that refugee-led organisations continue to gain traction both locally and internationally. These organisations, which often straddle multiple refugee groups from different backgrounds, offer an inspiring glimpse into the possibility of solidarity among different displaced populations. Although, as noted, RLOs are not without criticism, especially

concerning their representativeness, they reflect the growing influence of refugees in shaping the discourse around migration and asylum. Other positive developments include the rise of 'universities of sanctuary' — academic institutions that provide support and safe haven for displaced individuals, albeit a small number. Perhaps most encouragingly, mutual aid organisations like the Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan, Somalis' digital groups and other similar initiatives can take on some state and welfare functions and provide inspiring examples of forms of bottom-up governance, despite the huge challenges that they face and the dire circumstances in which they find themselves.

Looking beyond the setbacks and rising challenges, three mutually reinforcing principles outlined in *Refugia* are worth restating. First, refugees need to construct their own political futures: it is no longer possible or credible to rely simply on the force of international refugee law, the goodwill of governments, or the effectiveness of civil society organisations from outside the ranks of displaced people – let alone the intervention of university professors in the Global North. Second, while traditional acts of benevolence should not be scorned, acts of solidarity with refugees need to be more democratic and accountable, engaging wide swathes of the public and embracing grassroots organisations. Third, innovative ideas, even, as we suggested, utopian ones, need constant updating and rearticulation. Often we are in a mess because we cannot think beyond current paradigms and mindsets. If the current system and current thinking no longer work, we need to move beyond them to create more imaginative alternatives.

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Endnotes

[1] We acknowledge that some contest the idea of a 'global refugee crisis', and whether or not such a crisis is new. Such critics suggest that the 'crisis' is not global but features a limited number of intense conflicts and upheavals. An argument can indeed be made that the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015-16 only became labelled as such when around a million refugees reached Europe – even though several million refugees were already accommodated by Turkey (3.5 million), Lebanon (just under 815,000) and Jordan (just under 661,000). Our colleague Jeff Crisp, formerly of UNHCR, points out that the increase in numbers of forced migrants worldwide – taken to indicate a 'crisis' – is largely due to large increases in internal displacement rather than to those who cross international borders as refugees. Moreover, a substantial though unknown proportion of the increase in forced migrant numbers may be a result of natural population increase, as refugees remain for years and even decades in protracted displacement; in most cases the offspring of refugees are themselves deemed refugees, at least by UNHCR. Finally, a focus on the 'refugee crisis' tends to obscure those who cannot move because they are too old, disabled, sick, stuck, or otherwise 'immobilised' – a substantial number of people, who include most graphically and tragically Palestinians in Gaza under Israeli bombardment. These caveats about the language of 'crisis' of course by no means diminish the urgency of addressing mass displacement.

[2] To be published by Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles (ÉUB), based at l'Université libre de Bruxelles, under the editorship of Andrea Rea and Émilie Menz. Translation by Justine Feyereisen.

[3] This is an official estimate. The number may have dwindled to around 25,000, as many have left by any means they can to escape the dire conditions on the island.

[4] Rouba Mhaissen, Director of the Sawa Foundation for Development and Aid, Lebanon, provided information on the accommodation set-up in the years after the 2015–16 upheaval. It has to be acknowledged that, as time went on, exploitation was far from absent in some of these communities, not least by way of incorporation of the displaced as labourers on farms and other businesses. The Israeli bombing attacks on the Bekaa valley in 2024-25 have probably put paid to this form of transnational solidarity.

[5] It was Öcalan who, in prison in Turkey from 1999, gradually drifted from hard-core Marxist-Leninism and nationalism in favour of the eco-anarchist principles of the 'social ecology' activist and theorist Murray Bookchin, in particular the idea of democratic confederalism, which partly inspired the Rojava experiment (Gerber and Brincat 2021; Finley 2025). Hence, somewhat paradoxically, an attempt at bottom-up governance was brought about by direction from the top.

[6] In Arabic: ghurfa/ghuraf (plural) Tawaarib (غرف الطوارئ). The use of the word 'room' in this context appears to convey the notion of a place or space where people assemble, perhaps a forum.