Sovereignty Constraints and the Dilemmas of Multilateralism: The Limits of UNHCR Involvement in the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract. This paper looks at the difficulties faced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) during the Syrian refugee crisis, under the influence of state sovereignty and problems in international cooperation. After the Syrian conflict began in 2011, large numbers of refugees moved to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. International organizations, at the same time, faced growing pressure in providing humanitarian assistance and refugee protection. Using Lebanon as an example, the study explores the ways state sovereignty, domestic political interests, and weak international agreement limited the work and effectiveness of UNHCR. It also looks at several problems in multilateral refugee governance, including unequal burden-sharing, and different responses from the international community. The Syrian refugee crisis shows a continuing gap between humanitarian goals and political realities. It also reveals both the value and the limits of international organizations in today's system of global governance and refugee management frameworks.

Keywords: Syrian Refugee Crisis, UNHCR, State Sovereignty, Multilateralism, Lebanon.

1 Introduction

The Syrian refugee crisis has become one of the most serious humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, millions of people have been displaced both inside and outside the country, and neighboring states have experienced considerable social, economic, and political pressure. Lebanon, among these countries, has received a disproportionately large number of Syrian refugees despite its limited territory and fragile political system. According to estimates from UNHCR and the Lebanese government, approximately 1.5 million Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon during the crisis, accounting for nearly one quarter of the country's population. This made Lebanon one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries on a per capita basis. At the same time, Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not possess a national asylum law. As a result, refugee governance became highly dependent on government discretion, creating a particularly use-

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ful case for examining the tension between state sovereignty and international refugee protection.

Under these circumstances, the UNHCR has played an important role in providing humanitarian assistance and refugee protection. Its activities, however, have been significantly limited by the sovereignty of host states, as well as the constraints of international cooperation.

Previous research has discussed the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis and the role of international organizations in refugee governance. Some scholars have examined the tension between state sovereignty and refugee governance. Others have focused on institutional weaknesses within multilateral cooperation in international refugee protection. A further examination is still needed of how sovereignty constraints and multilateral challenges influence one another in practice, particularly in Lebanon and in the operations of UNHCR.

This paper examines the limitations of UNHCR intervention during the Syrian refugee crisis from the perspectives of sovereignty and multilateralism. The paper begins by reviewing the background of the Syrian refugee crisis and the relationship between state sovereignty and humanitarian intervention. It then analyzes the role of UNHCR in Lebanon, together with the challenges related to refugee registration, humanitarian assistance, and coordination with the Lebanese government. The paper also discusses wider issues in multilateral cooperation, including burden-sharing and political divisions within the international community. These discussions suggest that the Syrian refugee crisis reflects the structural limitations faced by international organizations under the contemporary international system.

2 Theoretical Framework

This paper examines why UNHCR remained active during the Syrian refugee crisis, while its influence on the wider management of the crisis remained limited. The study uses three perspectives to understand this difference between continued involvement and limited influence: sovereignty-centered constraints, the limits of multilateral cooperation, and collective action theory. These perspectives do not contradict each other. Each of them helps explain one aspect of the same issue. When considered together, they show that the limitations faced by UNHCR were related not only to the organization itself, but also to the broader political environment. In this environment, states continued to maintain control, major powers remained divided, and responsibility-sharing was uneven [1].

2.1 Sovereignty and the Limits of International Action

The first part of the framework focuses on sovereignty. During crises involving war, displacement, and cross-border intervention, international organizations cannot operate outside political realities. Their role is closely connected to what states permit them to do. The Syrian case clearly reflects this situation. The refugee crisis was closely linked to civil conflict, regional competition, and state control over territory,

borders, and access. Davids' study of Libya and Syria provides a useful perspective because it views sovereignty not only as a legal principle, but also as a practical constraint on intervention. His study shows that even in situations of severe humanitarian need, international action continues to be influenced by the interests and choices of states [1]. This perspective helps clarify why UNHCR was able to provide assistance, support protection activities, and coordinate humanitarian efforts, while having little influence over the wider political conditions that originally caused displacement. Similar observations can be found in Arar's research on Jordan and the Syrian refugee crisis. She argues that refugee-hosting states are not simply passive recipients of international governance. They also interact with external actors and make use of sovereignty when managing refugees, humanitarian aid, and international involvement [2]. Refugee governance, in this sense, is not only a humanitarian issue. It is also a political process in which host states seek to maintain authority while receiving resources from the international community. These conditions created clear limits on the role that UNHCR could play during the Syrian refugee crisis [2].

2.2 Multilateralism and Security Council Deadlock

The second part of the framework concerns the limits of multilateral cooperation under conditions of major-power rivalry. In principle, refugee crises are exactly the kind of issue that should require international coordination. They cross borders, affect several states at once, and require long-term cooperation. Institutional approaches are helpful here because they show why international institutions can matter even when the international system is conflictual. As Keohane argues, institutions can make cooperation easier by reducing uncertainty and providing a framework for continued interaction among states [3]. In this sense, multilateralism is not irrelevant to refugee governance. On the contrary, it is one of the basic conditions that make large-scale humanitarian coordination possible.

At the same time, institutions do not function outside politics. Their effectiveness depends on support from states, especially major powers. This is where the Syrian case becomes important. The United Nations University working paper on the Security Council argues that worsening relations among the permanent members, especially over Syria, made decision-making much more difficult and weakened the possibility of a coordinated response [4]. The paper also treats Syria as one of the clearest examples of how major-power rivalry eroded consensus within the Council [4]. For the present study, this matters because UNHCR operated inside a broader UN system whose political center was already deeply divided. Under such conditions, humanitarian agencies could continue operating their work, but the political basis for stronger collective action remained weak. Gifkins adds another important point. Her article shows that power in the Security Council is not limited to formal veto. Permanent members also influence outcomes through drafting processes, agenda-setting and informal negotiations [5]. Institutional deadlock is not created only through visible vetoes; everyday procedures can also reinforce this situation and often work in ways that favor powerful states. The Syrian case reflects this pattern, and helps explain the persistence of multilateral paralysis [4][5].

2.3 Collective Action and Uneven Burden-Sharing

The third part of the framework is based on collective action theory. The Syrian refugee crisis was not simply a result of political disagreement, it also involved unequal responsibility among states. Refugee protection requires financial resources, administrative capacity, long-term planning and political commitment. Many benefits of addressing displacement, including regional stability, are shared by a wider group of actors than those who bear the costs. Under these conditions states may prefer to reduce their own contribution, and depend on others to take on a larger part of the burden. Olson's discussion of collective action is relevant here. He argues that cooperation becomes more difficult when actors can benefit from a collective good without contributing to it in proportion to the benefits they receive [6]. This argument closely matches the situation of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Although many states acknowledged the seriousness of the crisis, responsibility remained distributed very unevenly. Neighboring host countries and a limited number of donors carried much of the burden, while wider international commitment remained partial and inconsistent. From this perspective, the limits of UNHCR were connected not only to sovereignty and major-power politics, but also to a broader failure of sustained burden-sharing [6]. Taken together, these three perspectives help explain why the role of UNHCR in the Syrian refugee crisis remained limited. A sovereignty-centered perspective shows why international organizations operate within boundaries set by states [1][2]. Institutional approaches help explain why multilateral cooperation remains necessary, even if it is often fragile [3]. The literature on the Security Council further shows why those limits became even harder to overcome when major powers were divided and Council decision-making weakened [4][5]. Collective action theory then helps explain why, even when the need for cooperation was widely recognized, states still failed to share responsibility in a stable and effective way [6]. This paper therefore treats UNHCR's limited influence as a structural problem rather than a narrow institutional failure. The organization remained important in humanitarian terms, but its ability to shape the broader course of the crisis was restricted by three interrelated conditions: the continued primacy of state authority, the weakening of multilateral consensus, and the uneven distribution of international responsibility [1][4][6]. These three perspectives should therefore be understood as mutually reinforcing rather than independent explanations. Sovereignty establishes the political boundaries within which UNHCR operates, while rivalry among major powers weakens multilateral institutions that would otherwise facilitate coordinated responses. These institutional weaknesses, in turn, intensify collective action problems by reducing incentives for states to contribute resources and share responsibilities. The interaction of these mechanisms explains why UNHCR could maintain humanitarian operations but remained unable to influence the broader governance of the Syrian refugee crisis. The organization's limitations therefore emerged not from a single factor, but from the combined effects of sovereignty, institutional fragmentation and unequal burden-sharing.

3 The Syrian Crisis and the Background of International Intervention

The Syrian refugee crisis did not emerge as an isolated humanitarian issue. It originated from a domestic political crisis that turned into prolonged armed conflict, and then gradually expanded into a regional and international issue. This background matters because UNHCR did not enter a neutral humanitarian space. Instead, it entered a crisis already shaped by violence, state interests, border politics, and international division.

3.1 From Domestic Unrest to a Large-Scale Displacement Crisis

The Syrian crisis is generally traced back to 2011, when anti-government protests were met with repression and the situation escalated into armed conflict. The report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic shows that violence in Syria developed into a broader pattern of confrontation and abuse rather than a short period of instability [7]. This is important for the present study because it means displacement in Syria was not a temporary side effect of unrest. It was a direct result of a conflict that became deeper, wider, and harder to contain over time.

As the war continued, daily life inside Syria became increasingly difficult. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 16.7 million people were estimated to require humanitarian assistance, the highest number recorded since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 [8]. This figure alone shows that the Syrian case cannot be reduced to a military or diplomatic dispute. It also became a crisis of survival. Access to health care, education, housing, food, and other basic services was severely disrupted. Under such conditions, displacement was no longer exceptional but became a structural outcome of prolonged conflict. For many Syrians, it became one of the few viable survival strategies. This is the point at which the Syrian conflict turned into a refugee crisis with clear regional consequences. UNHCR describes the Syria emergency as one of the largest displacement crises in the world [9]. Its regional data portal shows that millions of Syrians fled to neighboring countries, with the largest numbers concentrated in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt [10]. Once this cross-border movement reached such a scale, the Syrian conflict could no longer be treated as something contained within Syrian territory. Its consequences spread across borders and began to reshape the politics and policy priorities of the surrounding region.

3.2 The Role of International Organizations in Global Governance

The scale of displacement made some form of international intervention unavoidable. Neighboring states were the first to receive the main refugee flows, but the pressure they faced quickly exceeded what could realistically be managed through domestic capacity alone. Registration, shelter, food, health care, education, and coordination all

required resources and organization on a much larger scale. This was the context in which UNHCR became a central actor. UNHCR's own materials describe its role in terms of protection, emergency support, registration, and coordination [9]. In practice, this made the agency one of the most visible international organizations in the Syrian refugee response. It helped render large and chaotic refugee flows more administratively manageable through registration systems, assistance mechanisms, and inter-agency coordination. In that sense, its presence was not symbolic. It was practically necessary.

At the same time, necessity did not mean authority. This is where the broader literature becomes useful even in a chapter that is mainly about background. David's discussion of Libya and Syria shows that humanitarian action never takes place outside political struggle. Severe suffering does not produce decisive international action, because intervention is shaped by the interests of states, especially major powers [1]. Arar's work on Jordan makes a similar point from the side of refugee-hosting states. She shows that host governments do not simply receive international governance from outside. They negotiate, limit, and strategically use international involvement while preserving control over refugee policy and population management [2]. These works help explain why UNHCR's presence in the Syrian crisis was significant but never politically dominant. So even at the stage of background, one thing is already clear: international organizations became necessary because the refugee crisis was too large and too prolonged for one state to manage alone, but they entered a space in which political authority remained largely in state hands.

3.3 A Regional Crisis under Conditions of Political Division

The Syrian refugee crisis was not only large. It also unfolded in an international environment that was already deeply divided. This mattered because the wider UN system, within which UNHCR operates, depended on political conditions that were far from stable. Keohane's argument remains useful here. He does not treat cooperation as the natural result of shared interests. Cooperation, in his sense, develops when actors adjust their policies under conditions of discord rather than harmony [3]. This is a helpful way to read the Syrian case. Many states recognized that mass displacement was a serious regional problem. But recognition did not automatically produce coordinated action. The existence of a common problem did not remove conflict over borders, burden-sharing, security, or regional influence. That wider political division became especially visible in the Security Council. The United Nations University working paper on the Council argues that worsening relations among the permanent members seriously weakened the possibility of coordinated responses, with Syria becoming one of the clearest cases of paralysis under great-power rivalry [4].

Power is also shown through agenda-setting, drafting and informal negotiations. These things can affect the result before a formal vote happens [5]. This point is useful for understanding the situation of UNHCR. The agency worked inside the UN system, but there was not a strong political agreement behind that system. In the Syrian refugee crisis, a clear contradiction could be seen. Humanitarian cooperation became more necessary as the crisis continued. Political agreement among states, how-

ever, became weaker. The need for cooperation increased, but political support did not increase in the same way. This situation had an important influence on the role of UNHCR.

3.4 Uneven Responsibility and the Limits of Support

Another important issue is the unequal sharing of responsibility. Countries near Syria accepted most of the refugees. International support from other countries was limited and often uneven. The regional response data of UNHCR shows this situation very clearly, because it shows how heavily the crisis was concentrated in a few states close to Syria [10]. In other words, geography shaped responsibility prior to political negotiation. But politics made that imbalance worse. Olson's logic of collective action is useful here because it helps explain why wide recognition of a common problem does not guarantee proportionate contribution [6]. Refugee protection produces benefits that extend beyond the states or agencies paying the immediate cost. Regional stability reduced onward movement, and some degree of humanitarian containment benefit a much wider set of actors than those who receive and support refugees. Under these conditions, it is rational for many actors to contribute less than what the situation requires. This helps explain why UNHCR was placed in a difficult position from the start. It was expected to coordinate and sustain a large-scale response, but it had to do so in a system where responsibility was never evenly shared. UNHCR's regional materials repeatedly reflect the continuing strain placed on refugee-hosting countries and response systems [10][11]. That strain was not just a logistical issue. It was part of the political structure of the crisis itself. Arar's analysis again fits this point well. Her argument that hosts states leverage sovereignty while managing international pressure helps explain why support for refugees was never simply a question of humanitarian need [2]. Funding, policy access, registration systems, and refugee governance all existed inside negotiations over authority. The Syrian refugee crisis developed from domestic unrest into a long and continuing conflict. It later became a regional displacement crisis that required sustained international involvement [7][8][9]. The scale of refugee movement made an organized international response difficult to avoid, and UNHCR gradually became one of the main actors in that response [9][10].

The background of this intervention, however, was not purely humanitarian. Responsibility for the response was distributed unevenly, placing long-term pressure on a limited number of host countries and support systems [6][10][11]. At the same time, the wider UN system operated under conditions of major-power rivalry and weak multilateral consensus, particularly on issues related to Syria [3][4][5]. Refugee governance also remained closely linked to state authority and host-state control, limiting how far international organizations could act [1][2].

What appeared to be a humanitarian response on the surface was also influenced by negotiations over sovereignty, resources and control. The Syrian refugee crisis should therefore be understood not only as the setting in which UNHCR carried out its work, but also as a constrained political environment that shaped the limits of that work from the very beginning.

4 UNHCR's Role in the Syrian Refugee Crisis

The previous chapter discussed the background of the Syrian refugee crisis. This chapter focuses on the role of UNHCR in responding to the crisis. Before discussing the limits of UNHCR's action in the next chapter, it is necessary to look at its main functions and activities.

UNHCR was deeply involved in the Syrian refugee response and became one of the most visible international organizations working in the region. Its work included humanitarian assistance, refugee registration, protection activities, coordination with different actors, and the promotion of international refugee protection norms. Even so, the role of UNHCR should not be seen as political control over the crisis. Most of its activities were humanitarian, administrative and normative in nature.

UNHCR could help refugees meet basic needs. It could also make refugee movements easier to identify and manage, while reminding states of their responsibilities toward refugee protection. These functions, however, did not allow UNHCR to determine border policies, end the conflict, or require states to share responsibilities equally. The Syrian refugee crisis shows that UNHCR played an important role, but this role remained mainly within humanitarian governance rather than sovereign political decision-making.

4.1 Humanitarian Assistance and Emergency Response

The first and most direct role of UNHCR in the Syrian refugee crisis was humanitarian assistance. As the conflict continued, large numbers of Syrians were forced to leave their homes and move either inside Syria or across borders into neighboring countries. Many of them lost access to housing, income, education, health care, and basic public services. Under these conditions, humanitarian assistance became necessary not only for refugee survival but also for maintaining social and economic stability within host communities. UNHCR's mandate includes the international protection of forcibly displaced populations and supporting them through emergency assistance and other forms of protection [12]. In the Syrian case, this general role became especially important because the crisis was both large-scale and prolonged. UNHCR's Syria Emergency materials describe its work in relation to shelter, core relief items, cash assistance, protection, and support for displaced people and host communities [13]. These activities show that UNHCR was directly engaged in managing the humanitarian consequences of displacement.

4.2 Refugee Registration and Protection

The second major role of UNHCR was refugee registration and protection. Registration is often seen as a technical procedure, but in refugee governance it has great importance. Through registration, refugees become visible to humanitarian agencies, host governments and donor systems. Information about refugees can be collected through this process. Humanitarian organizations can know who needs assistance,

where refugees are staying and what kinds of support are needed. Registration also connects refugees with services and protection mechanisms [14].

In the Syrian refugee crisis, registration became very important because the number of displaced people was extremely large. Millions of Syrians crossed national borders within a relatively short time. Humanitarian work would have been much more difficult without registration. Planning assistance, identifying vulnerable groups and coordinating different activities all depended on basic registration information. In this way, large-scale displacement became easier to manage from an administrative perspective. The crisis also became more visible, making it easier for UNHCR and other organizations to organize their response.

Protection was closely linked with registration. Registered refugees could receive better access to documents, assistance and protection services. This was especially important for vulnerable groups, including children, women, older people, people with disabilities and families with unstable incomes. The role of UNHCR was not limited to recording refugee numbers. It also worked to help refugees gain access to different forms of protection [15][16].

In this sense, registration was not simply an administrative tool. It was also a protection tool. Janmyr's study examines how UNHCR carried out its international protection mandate in the context of the large-scale Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon [17]. She shows that UNHCR's registration of Syrian refugees was central to refugee protection, but also politically sensitive. In Lebanon, registration became connected to questions of legal status, state sovereignty, and the government's control over refugee policy [17]. This example shows that UNHCR's protection work was never purely technical. Even registration could become a politically contested issue. This point is important for the present paper. UNHCR could register refugees and support protection, but it could not fully determine how host states treated them. Refugee policy remained strongly shaped by state authority. Host governments-controlled borders, residence rules, labor access, public services, and many other aspects of refugee life. Therefore, UNHCR's protection role depended heavily on cooperation with states. This does not mean that UNHCR's role was unimportant. Rather, it shows that its protection function operated inside a political space still controlled by sovereign governments.

4.3 Coordination in the Regional Refugee Response

Another role of UNHCR was coordination. The Syrian refugee crisis involved many different actors, such as host governments, UN agencies, international NGOs, local organizations, donor countries and refugee communities. The crisis affected several countries at the same time and crossed national borders. Because of this, separate actions by each country were not enough; humanitarian response needed planning, coordination, information sharing and some distribution of responsibilities.

UNHCR became an important factor in this process because refugee protection is part of its mandate. During the regional response to the Syrian refugee crisis, UNHCR collected and organized information about refugee numbers, locations, needs, funding requirements and response activities. Operational data and regional response reports

helped the international community understand the scale of the crisis more clearly [10][13].

Information work may appear administrative. It still had practical value. Governments, donors and humanitarian organizations depended on data to identify where support was needed, and how resources could be allocated. The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) is another example of this coordination role. The 3RP was established as a regional framework for responding to the Syrian crisis. Humanitarian actors and development actors worked together under this framework; refugee protection was also linked with support for host communities [18].

The 3RP shows that the Syrian refugee response was not limited to emergency assistance. Long-term planning, resilience and cooperation with local and national institutions were also necessary. Through these efforts, UNHCR connected different parts of the regional response system. Its work was not only direct assistance to refugees. It also supported the operation of a broader humanitarian network. Because of this role, UNHCR became one of the most visible international organizations involved in the Syrian refugee response.

Coordination, however, was different from political authority. UNHCR could collect information, provide advice, support planning and coordinate activities. It could not require states or donors to follow a single strategy. Responsibility-sharing in the Syrian refugee crisis remained uneven. Neighboring countries continued to carry much of the burden, while international support often remained selective and incomplete. Coordination could reduce some disorder in the response process, but it could not completely solve the deeper collective action problem.

4.4 Promotion of International Refugee Protection Norms

The fourth role of UNHCR was normative. In addition to providing assistance and coordinating operations, UNHCR also promoted international refugee protection norms. This role comes from its mandate as the United Nations agency responsible for the international protection of refugees. The Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established UNHCR's responsibility to provide international protection and seek permanent solutions for refugees [15].

Therefore, UNHCR's role is not limited to material assistance; it also involves defending protection standards and reminding states of their responsibilities toward displaced people. This normative role is important because refugee crises are not only logistical problems, but they are also questions of rights, legal status and political responsibility. When refugees are treated mainly as security risks, economic burdens or temporary populations to be managed, their protection can become weaker.

UNHCR's role is partly to keep the language of protection visible in such political environments. It frames refugees not only as people needing aid, but also as rights-bearing people who require international protection.

In the Syrian crisis this role was especially difficult. Host states faced real pressures, including economic strain, security concerns and domestic political tension. Under these conditions, refugee protection could easily become secondary to border control, social stability or national interest.

Janmyr's study shows this tension clearly in the Lebanese case. Lebanon rejected full participation in the international refugee law regime, and insisted that it was not a country of asylum while still hosting a very large number of Syrian refugees [17].

In such a context, UNHCR had to promote protection norms while also maintaining cooperation with an unwilling or cautious host state. This shows both the value and the limit of UNHCR's normative role. Norms can provide standards for action and shape expectations; they do not automatically create compliance. States may accept humanitarian language while still limiting entry, restricting rights or prioritizing their own political interests.

UNHCR could promote refugee protection norms, but it could not guarantee that states would fully implement them. Therefore, its normative influence was important, but it remained dependent on political conditions.

Overall, this chapter has shown that UNHCR played several important roles in the Syrian refugee crisis. It provided humanitarian assistance, supported refugee registration and protection, coordinated parts of the regional response and promoted international refugee protection norms. These roles made UNHCR one of the most important international organizations in the Syrian refugee response.

At the same time, UNHCR's role was mainly humanitarian, administrative and normative. It was not a political authority capable of deciding the direction of the crisis. It could support refugees, organize assistance and promote protection standards, but it could not force states to open borders, accept refugees, provide funding or end the conflict that caused displacement.

Therefore, the Syrian case shows a clear gap between operational importance and political authority. UNHCR was deeply involved in the crisis; operational involvement did not translate into political control. This gap provides the basis for the next chapter, which analyzes the structural limits of UNHCR's action through sovereignty constraints, great-power politics and the dilemmas of multilateral cooperation.

5 The Limits of UNHCR's Action in the Syrian Crisis

The previous chapters show that UNHCR was deeply involved in the Syrian refugee response. It provided emergency assistance, supported registration and protection, coordinated regional response mechanisms, and promoted refugee protection norms. However, this involvement did not mean that UNHCR had the power to decide the direction of the crisis. Although UNHCR played an important humanitarian role, this did not translate into meaningful political authority. UNHCR could provide protection and humanitarian assistance, but it lacked the authority to determine border policies, resolve the Syrian conflict, or enforce equitable responsibility-sharing among states. This chapter therefore examines the limits of UNHCR's action. The main argument is that UNHCR's limited influence was not simply caused by weakness inside the organization. Instead, the situation was shaped by the political environment in which the organization operated. During the Syrian refugee crisis, refugee protection was influenced by three related factors: the authority of sovereign states, rivalry among major powers and difficulties in collective burden-sharing. These constraints did not stop

UNHCR from carrying out its work. They did, however, place the organization in a position where most of its efforts focused on managing the humanitarian consequences of the crisis. The deeper political causes and decisions remained outside its influence.

5.1 Sovereignty Constraints

The first and most basic limit was sovereignty. Refugee protection is often discussed as a humanitarian issue, but in practice it is closely tied to state authority. States control territory, borders, residence rules, work permits, security policy, and access to public services. These are not merely technical issues. They directly decide how refugees live, whether they can stay legally, and whether humanitarian organizations can reach them. UNHCR can provide protection standards and practical support, but it cannot take the place of states in making major decisions. The Syrian refugee crisis showed this problem very clearly. Countries near Syria, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, received large numbers of refugees. These countries faced pressure in many areas such as housing, education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure and domestic politics. Refugee policy was not only related to humanitarian assistance. It was also connected with national interests, social stability and state control.

Under these conditions, UNHCR needed to work together with host governments. It could not decide refugee policies by itself. Davids discusses sovereignty as more than a legal concept. He also describes it as a practical limitation on humanitarian action [1]. Even in situations with serious humanitarian suffering, international organizations still depend on states for access and permission. UNHCR could support refugees and coordinate protection activities. It could not require states to accept more refugees, keep borders open or provide long-term legal status.

Arar's study of Jordan provides a similar argument [2]. Host countries are not simply passive participants in international refugee governance. They cooperate with UNHCR, but they also use sovereignty when dealing with international organizations and donor countries. As a result, states can accept aid, registration support and technical assistance while continuing to control important policy decisions. The activities of UNHCR depended not only on humanitarian needs, but also on the choices made by host governments.

Lebanon provides a useful example of how sovereignty constrained UNHCR's activities. The country has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and lacks a formal national asylum system. Consequently, refugee governance remained closely linked to state authority and administrative discretion. During the Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon hosted approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, accounting for nearly one quarter of its population. Such demographic pressure made refugee governance a highly sensitive political issue. Janmyr's study of UNHCR and the Syrian refugee response in Lebanon points out that refugee registration and refugee status became politically sensitive issues [17]. This sensitivity became particularly visible after 2015, when the Lebanese government requested UNHCR to suspend the registration of newly arrived Syrian refugees. Although UNHCR continued to help, registration

itself became subject to political negotiation. In addition, many Syrian refugees lacked legal residency, further increasing their vulnerability and dependence on changing government policies. These developments demonstrate that refugee governance in Lebanon was not simply a humanitarian issue but also a question of sovereignty and state control.

Nassar and Stel's research on Lebanon develops this point further. They argue that Lebanon's institutional ambiguity in responding to Syrian refugees should not be understood only as weak governance, but also as a form of governance strategy [19]. This point is very useful for this paper. Ambiguous refugee policy allows a state to keep flexibility and avoid stronger legal commitments. It can also shift part of the practical burden to international organizations. For UNHCR, however, this creates a difficult situation. The organization may be expected to help and protect, but it cannot create a stable legal framework for refugees by itself. Tsourapa's study of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey also helps explain why sovereignty was not only defensive, but sometimes strategic [20]. He shows that host states may use refugee hosting as a foreign policy resource and seek material or political gains from the international community. This means that refugee governance was not simply a field of humanitarian cooperation. It was also a field of bargaining. UNHCR had to operate within this bargaining process, even though its main purpose was refugee protection. Kagan's discussion of UNHCR as a "surrogate state" in parts of the Middle East also helps clarify this tension [21]. In some contexts, UNHCR carries out many practical tasks that look almost state-like, such as registration, documentation, assistance, and coordination. However, this does not mean that UNHCR receives real sovereign authority. Responsibility may be transferred to UNHCR, but power remains with states. Ultimately, authority over borders, legal status, and refugee policy remained in the hands of states, while UNHCR's activities continued to depend on government cooperation. Nevertheless, UNHCR was not merely a passive actor under these constraints. Faced with restrictions imposed by host governments, the organization continuously adjusted its operational strategies in order to preserve humanitarian access. Rather than directly challenging state authority, UNHCR relied on negotiation with government agencies, expanded cooperation with local NGOs, prioritized assistance to the most vulnerable groups, and adapted registration and cash assistance mechanisms to changing political conditions. These strategies demonstrate that UNHCR exercised a degree of institutional agency despite operating within sovereignty-based constraints.

5.2 Great Power Politics

The second limitation was related to great power politics. The Syrian crisis was much more than a civil war inside Syria. It also became a regional refugee crisis, and later developed into a wider international issue. Questions about sovereignty, intervention, regional influence, and the future of the Syrian government were all involved.

Different major powers held different views on these questions. Reaching agreement was difficult. As a result, the United Nations found it harder to respond in a unified way. UNHCR worked inside this broader UN system, so it could not avoid these political conditions. Although UNHCR is a humanitarian agency, its work was

still affected by disagreements among powerful states. Refugee assistance could continue; solving the deeper causes of displacement was much harder.

The Security Council provides a clear example. According to The UN Security Council in an Age of Great Power Rivalry, relations among permanent members became increasingly tense, making decision-making more difficult. Syria became one of the clearest examples of this problem [4]. The refugee crisis continued because the war itself continued. Without political agreement inside the Security Council, addressing the roots of displacement became extremely difficult.

Gifkins also discusses how power operates inside the Security Council [5]. Formal vetoes are important, but they are not the only source of influence. Drafting, agenda-setting and informal negotiations can also shape outcomes. Important decisions are often influenced before voting even begins. Because of this, UN action could be restricted long before a formal decision was made. In the Syrian case, multilateral action became narrower, and political space remained limited even when humanitarian work continued.

Another useful example comes from Leenders and Mansour [22]. Their study shows that humanitarian activities inside Syria were influenced by sovereignty, wartime control and regime politics. The limits facing UNHCR were not limited to neighboring host countries. Similar problems also existed inside Syria itself. Humanitarian access, aid delivery and protection work related to power relations inside the conflict, rather than being purely technical issues. UNHCR was placed in a reactive position. The same disagreements that made the conflict longer also made a stronger international response harder to achieve.

UNHCR was placed in a reactive position. It could respond after displacement occurred, but it could not stop the conflict. It also could not change the strategic choices of major powers. The Syrian case should therefore not be viewed simply as a failure of UNHCR. The organization had no authority to solve a conflict shaped by regional and international rivalries. Its humanitarian role remained important, but the political causes of displacement were beyond its reach.

Great power politics limited UNHCR indirectly but deeply. It did not necessarily stop UNHCR from delivering aid, but it prevented the international system from giving UNHCR a stronger political foundation.

5.3 The Dilemma of Multilateralism and Collective Action

The third limitation was related to multilateral cooperation. The Syrian refugee crisis was too large for any single country or organization to manage alone. Refugees crossed borders, host countries faced growing pressure, and humanitarian agencies needed funding, information and cooperation. Financial support and long-term responsibility-sharing were also necessary. Because of these conditions, international cooperation has become very important.

Even so, cooperation did not always happen smoothly. Different states had different interests and priorities. Keohane argues that international institutions can help states cooperate by providing information, rules and channels for communication [3]. Institutions, however, cannot remove disagreements between states. Their effective-

ness still depends on whether governments are willing to work together. When states become divided or unwilling to bear the costs of cooperation, international institutions face obvious limits.

Olson's collective action theory helps explain this issue more clearly [6]. Refugee protection created a situation in which many countries benefited from regional stability, while neighboring states carried much of the direct burden. The benefits and costs were not shared equally. Countries close to Syria accepted large numbers of refugees and faced most of the immediate pressure. Other states could still benefit from stability in the region, but their contributions were often much smaller. A free-riding problem appeared under these conditions. The Syrian refugee crisis reflects this problem clearly. Although governments widely recognized the humanitarian nature of the crisis, responsibility-sharing remained uneven. Neighboring countries continued to bear most of the burden, while wider international support often remained limited. UNHCR could coordinate response plans and request assistance, but it could not compel states to provide sufficient funding or participate in long-term responsibility-sharing.

Kale's study of the Syrian refugee protection crisis supports this argument [23]. She points out that the Syrian case exposed major weaknesses in efforts to build an effective international burden-sharing system. This issue is important because the limits facing UNHCR were not only connected with sovereignty or competition among major powers. Another problem came from the unequal sharing of responsibility among states.

Fujibayashi's research on fiscal burden-sharing after 2011 reaches a similar conclusion [24]. His study shows that government contributions to refugee governance are often influenced by political interests and strategic considerations. International responsibility is therefore more complicated than it may appear. States may support refugee governance, but support is not guaranteed and is not always based only on humanitarian concerns [25][26][27].

It depends on interests, distance from the crisis, domestic priorities, and calculations about how much they are willing to contribute. This burden-sharing problem directly affected UNHCR's work. The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) repeatedly faced major funding gaps. For example, in several years less than 60 percent of requested funding was received, leaving significant humanitarian needs unmet. As a result, assistance programmes often had to be reduced or prioritized despite continuing refugee needs.

UNHCR relies heavily on voluntary contributions from states and donors [28]. When funding is insufficient, humanitarian programs must be reduced, delayed, or prioritized. This can affect cash assistance, education support, health services, shelter, and protection work. Therefore, the failure of collective action was not only an abstract problem in international relations theory. It had concrete consequences for refugees and for UNHCR's operational capacity [29]. States still needed UNHCR because the crisis exceeded national capacity [30][31]. However, the same states were often unwilling to give up enough authority, resources, or responsibility to make multilateral governance fully effective. UNHCR was therefore left in a difficult middle position [32]. It was expected to coordinate and assist, but it did not have the authority to

ensure full cooperation. This is why the Syrian case shows not the disappearance of multilateralism, but the limits of multilateralism under conditions of sovereignty, rivalry, and unequal responsibility-sharing.

This chapter has analyzed the limits of UNHCR's action in the Syrian refugee crisis. It has been argued that UNHCR's limited role was not simply the result of organizational weakness. Rather, it was produced by a wider political structure. First, sovereignty constrained UNHCR because states retained control over borders, territory, legal status, and access. Second, great power politics weakened the broader UN response and prevented a stronger political foundation for humanitarian action. Third, the dilemma of multilateralism and collective action made responsibility-sharing unstable and uneven. These three limits were closely connected. Sovereignty gave states the power to control refugee policy. Great power rivalry prevented the UN system from acting with unity. Collective action problems made many states unwilling to share the costs of protection equally [33]. Under these conditions, UNHCR could perform an important humanitarian function, but it could not assume political control over the governance of the crisis. Therefore, the Syrian refugee crisis shows a clear gap between humanitarian action and political authority [34]. UNHCR could help refugees survive, register displaced populations, coordinate assistance, and promote protection norms. But it could not force states to open borders, end the conflict, or share responsibility fairly. Its role was necessary, but structurally limited. This supports the main argument of this paper. In a state-centered international system, multilateralism does not disappear, but its effectiveness depends heavily on state cooperation and major-power consensus [35]. When that cooperation is weak, international organizations can still act, but mainly within the humanitarian and administrative margins of crisis governance. The Syrian case therefore reveals not only the limits of UNHCR, but also the broader dilemma of multilateral refugee protection in a world still organized around sovereign states [36][37].

6 Conclusion

This paper has discussed why UNHCR's involvement in the Syrian refugee crisis was important but still limited. In this study, the main question was not whether UNHCR played a role in the crisis. As shown in the previous chapters, UNHCR clearly did. It provided humanitarian assistance, supported registration and protection, coordinated parts of the regional response, and continued to promote refugee protection norms. However, these activities did not mean that UNHCR had the power to decide how the crisis should be governed. The Syrian case therefore shows a gap between humanitarian presence and political authority.

The gap between UNHCR's visibility and its actual influence can be understood in several ways. One important factor was state sovereignty. Refugee protection is often discussed as a humanitarian issue. Many important decisions still depend on states. Governments decide who can enter the country, who can stay, what legal status refugees receive and whether they can access services such as education, healthcare and

employment. UNHCR can provide support and advice, but it cannot replace state authority.

This situation could be seen clearly during the Syrian refugee crisis. The number of displaced people was extremely large, so neighboring countries needed international assistance. At the same time, these governments continued to control refugee policies. UNHCR was able to help refugees and support protection activities; its work still depended on the space provided by host states.

Political divisions also limited the influence of UNHCR. The Syrian crisis was not only a humanitarian emergency. It was related to civil war, regional interests and competition among major powers. Different governments held different views on Syria, making agreement difficult. Because of this, the wider UN system could not respond with a strong and unified political position. UNHCR continued its humanitarian work, but the organization had no authority to solve the conflict itself. It dealt with the consequences of displacement, while the political causes remained outside its control.

Another issue involved responsibility-sharing. International cooperation was necessary during the Syrian refugee crisis, yet responsibility was distributed unevenly. Countries neighboring Syria carried much of the burden. Support from the wider international community was often limited, and sometimes unstable. This situation resembles a collective action problem. Many countries benefit from regional stability and refugee protection, but not all are willing to contribute equally. UNHCR could request funding and coordinate plans. It could not require governments to provide more resources, accept additional refugees or take responsibility over a longer period.

These issues were not simply internal problems of UNHCR. They were connected with the broader structure of international politics. The refugee crisis was too large for a single country to manage alone, making the role of UNHCR necessary. Important political decisions, however, remained in the hands of states. Because of this, UNHCR became highly visible and active, but its political influence remained limited.

The Syrian case also says something about multilateralism. Multilateral cooperation did not disappear during the crisis. UNHCR continued to operate. Regional response frameworks existed. Donor support and cooperation with host governments also continued. At the same time, the crisis revealed clear limits of multilateral cooperation. International institutions could support coordination and humanitarian action, but they could not remove political disagreements among states or guarantee equal responsibility-sharing. It could organize humanitarian response, but it could not overcome sovereignty, great-power rivalry, or unequal burden-sharing.

The findings of this paper suggest that UNHCR should not be regarded simply as a success or a failure. During the Syrian refugee crisis, the organization played an important role. It helped many refugees, made the refugee situation more visible and continued to promote protection norms. These efforts were important. Still, UNHCR could not control the political development of the crisis. Large refugee crises cannot be managed by one state alone, so international cooperation is necessary. At the same time, states still want to keep control over important decisions. Because of this, a gap often exists between what international organizations are expected to do and what

they can do. The experience of UNHCR in the Syrian refugee crisis shows this situation very clearly. However, multilateral cooperation becomes limited when there is no strong political consensus, stable responsibility-sharing, or support from sovereign states. UNHCR's involvement in the Syrian crisis therefore shows not the disappearance of multilateralism, but its limits under conditions of sovereignty, rivalry, and unequal responsibility-sharing. The Syrian refugee crisis also offers broader implications for the study of international organizations. Rather than supporting a single theoretical perspective, the case demonstrates that the effectiveness of international organizations is shaped by the interaction of sovereignty, institutional cooperation, and collective action. Realism explains why states retained ultimate authority over refugee governance; institutionalism explains why international cooperation remained necessary despite political disagreement; and collective action theory explains why burden-sharing remained persistently uneven. Together, these perspectives suggest that international organizations should be understood neither as fully autonomous actors nor as passive victims of state politics. Instead, their influence depends on their ability to operate within political constraints while facilitating cooperation among states. The Syrian case therefore refines existing theories of global governance by illustrating that humanitarian effectiveness is determined less by formal institutional mandates than by the political environment in which those mandates are implemented.

Although Lebanon serves as the primary case in this paper, comparison with other major refugee-hosting countries also highlights important differences in the constraints faced by UNHCR. In Turkey, the Temporary Protection Regulation provided a relatively clearer legal basis for refugee administration, allowing closer institutional cooperation with UNHCR. Jordan adopted a more centralized coordination mechanism while maintaining strong governmental control over refugee governance. Iraq, particularly the Kurdistan Region, experienced different administrative arrangements due to its federal political structure. By contrast, Lebanon's lack of a formal asylum system and suspension of refugee registration after 2015 created particularly severe operational constraints. These comparisons suggest that while sovereignty constrained UNHCR across all host countries, the form and intensity of those constraints varied according to domestic legal frameworks and political institutions.

This study also has limitations. It focuses primarily on Lebanon as a case study and therefore cannot fully capture the different political and legal conditions faced by UNHCR in other host countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Future research could adopt a comparative approach to examine how sovereignty constraints vary across different refugee-hosting contexts.

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