Introduction

⊚⊚⊚⊚⊚

A United Nations (UN) agency set up after the Second World War to over-see the application of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has the mission to find 'international protection' for migrants[1] who have lost the protection of the state to which they belong. Whilst the UNHCR's initial mandate was re-stricted to refugees in Europe, it now operates worldwide. Although the or-ganisation used to be primarily active in the legal and diplomatic spheres, its large-scale expansion during the 1990s was accompanied by an increase in its humanitarian activities. Today, the UNHCR is a huge bureaucracy operating in 135 countries and responsible for some 90 million people whom the agency terms 'displaced'. It is also the core component of a larger mechanism for the government of refugees, which has also become highly institutionalised and extends throughout the world. It now involves a multiplicity of actors in diverse capacities – states, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, local advocacy organisations and others whose work is framed by the 1951 Convention.

This volume presents a political anthropology of the UNHCR. Its aim is to understand this UN agency and its activity. How does the UNHCR operate? In what ways does it exercise its power? What is the impact of its activity? These questions arose for me following my degree in international relations. On the one hand, sympathetic to UN and humanitarian values, I saw the UNHCR as a potential career path. On the other hand, I was troubled by the vehement criticism to which the organisation had been subject since the 1990s. My research project emerged from the desire to understand the impact of the UNHCR's activity on the basis of my own experience as an apprentice officer by studying the organisation's internal functioning.

In answer to these questions, this study focuses on the UNHCR's inter-vention in the Afghan crisis during the 2000s. This was (and remains) a key crisis for the UNHCR. For over thirty years, Afghans have constituted

the largest refugee population in the world, only surpassed in recent years by Syrians.[2] Even before Afghanistan was ravaged by four decades of conflict, it was already one of the world's poorest countries, and migration was a widespread subsistence strategy. The UNHCR intervened in the region in the early 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of the country, and it based itself mainly in Pakistan. By the end of the 1980s, the organisation had reported some six million refugees, mainly resident in Iran and Pakistan. Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, a UN-sponsored reconstruction project aimed at re-establishing political stability in Afghanistan was initiated. It was in this context that the UNHCR established the biggest repatriation and reintegration programmes in its history. But in 2008 the organisation was still reporting some three million refugees (one-seventh of the Afghan population according to current estimates, and one-tenth of the persons under the UNHCR's mandate), while Afghanistan was once again plunged into conflict.

In order to understand how the UNHCR's policies are developed and organised, between 2006 and 2008 I conducted an ethnographic study in the organisation's offices in Geneva and Kabul, cities that in the mid-2000s represented the nerve centres of multilateralism and international aid. The study began with an internship at the UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva, at the Afghanistan Desk (March–July 2006). Under the United Nations Volunteers programme, I was then taken on in the Kabul Branch Office, where as Donor Reporting Officer I was responsible for relations with funders and writing memos for external circulation (April 2007–March 2008). During this period I was able to observe the work of the UNHCR *in process*, to grasp the dispersed nature of its bureaucratic apparatus and to dissect its internal functioning, the technocratic procedures through which the UNHCR wields its authority and the relations it maintains with its many interlocutors.

The linking theme of this study is an innovative project, devised in 2003, that aimed to promote 'comprehensive solutions to Afghan displacement'. The project was original in its recognition of mobility as indispensable for Afghans' subsistence, and as an irreversible phenomenon. While the 'traditional solutions' implemented by the UNHCR ('integration', 'resettlement' or 'repatriation') always entail the sedentarisation of people fleeing conflict, this strategy proposed that mobility should be incorporated into the solutions. I was able to shadow the two authors of this project when they were posted in Geneva and when they were assigned to the Kabul office, where they directed the Afghan Operation between 2007 and 2009. I was thus able to follow this innovative strategy from its conception to its implementation, and the obstacles that it encountered that ultimately prevented it from shifting the organisation's nation- and state-centred vision of the world.

Retracing the trajectory of this project offers a way to grasp the UNHCR in its material nature as a network of offices and agents linked together by bundles of practices and a bureaucratic habitus. Rather than being a monolithic entity acting in accordance with a single line of thinking, as it is often presented and as it presents itself, the UNHCR thus emerges as a polymorphous, multi-positioned bureaucratic apparatus, shaped from within by its multiple contexts of intervention and by the topography of broader power relations.

Moreover, tracking this project highlighted the limitations of a mission that leads the UNHCR to reproduce the (nation-based) order at the root of the 'problem' that it was set up to resolve. While this groundbreaking project testifies to the organisation's capacity to innovate and reflect on its activity, the obstacles it encountered also reveal a paradox: the UNHCR seeks to assist migrants, but sets its work in the same state-centred, sedentary order that restricts movement and gives meaning to and legitimises the organisation's existence and mission. In other words, the interstate nature of the organisation justifies the existence of the UNHCR and its universalist moral claims, but by the same token, it limits the UNHCR's repertoire of action and its range of options, making the problem it is designed to solve insoluble. The attempt to incorporate Afghan migrants into a state jurisdiction thus contributes to a mechanism aimed at their emplacement in Afghanistan, and the containment and illegalisation of Afghan mobility.

Liisa Malkki (1992) has shown how the international refugee regime is rooted in the UN system, which propagates a sedentary and territorialised view of identities and constructs mobility as a problem. My study shows that the nation-based order substantially restricts the UNHCR's activities, but also shapes the way in which the organisation changes the world. Structured by a sedentary, state-centred rationale, the effect of the UNHCR's activity is to implant the national order and consolidate the allegedly 'superior' liberal-democratic model of the state. By acting on states, migrants and collective imaginaries, the UNHCR's interventions in fact imprint the nation-based order on the material and/or symbolic levels.

The UNHCR and the international refugee regime continued to evolve during the 2010s. The use of big data, the requirement for 'evidence-based policy', the New Public Management turn and attention to environmental issues, for example, were reinforced; since 2015, the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe and, more recently, the Ukrainian crisis have forced the organisation to devote more attention and resources to the continent; the organisation's interventions are more strongly influenced by the 'cluster' system; and the aims of the 2019 Global Compact on Refugees now shape its language. In Afghanistan, the takeover by the Taliban put a definitive end to the two-decade international intervention and was followed by an unprecedented economic and food crisis. But these developments in no way change the conclusions

of my study, either concerning the UNHCR's functioning or concerning the structural limitations of the international refugee regime. The configuration is the same: a country in crisis, major migration flows, few possibilities of residence elsewhere, an organisation trapped in global power relations and its nation-based view of the world that prevents it from accepting the fundamental characteristic of those who are its concern – their mobility.

Although less studied than the major international economic and development organisations, the UNHCR has been the subject of a number of studies in international relations (Barnett 2001; Betts 2009a, 2009b; Garnier 2014; Gilbert 1998; Hall 2013; Hammerstad 2014; Lavenex 2016; Loescher 1993, 2001a, 2001b; Loescher et al. 2008; McKittrick 2008; Roberts 1998). These studies highlight its endeavour to remain autonomous of states, that are seen as factors determining constraint and opportunity, and they emphasise the influence of interstate relations on the UNHCR's policies. But they tend to reify the organisation, presenting it as a disembodied, monolithic actor, and to overlook the actors and arenas that do not belong to the interstate sphere.

More recently, social science studies have documented the UNHCR's functioning and the consequences of its activities. Some of these studies (which are often critical) shed light on the organisation's work of containing mobility and screening migrants that they see as major forms of domination during the post-Cold War era (Agier 2003, 2011; Barnett 2001; Duffield 2008; Harrell-Bond 1986; Scheel and Ratfisch 2014). Focusing mainly on refugee populations and contexts of intervention, they pay little attention to the organisation's internal workings. Nor are the effects of the UNHCR's activities outside the management of migration taken into consideration. Other studies, by contrast, explore the organisation's functioning on the basis of internal empirical studies or detailed analyses of certain procedures (Cole 2018; Crisp 2017; Fresia 2010, 2012; Glasman 2017; Hyndman 2000; Jacobsen and Sandvik 2011; Morris 2017; Sandvik 2011; Valluy 2009). These studies 'unveil' the UNHCR, taking us from preparatory meetings for the Executive Committee to asylum application hearings in France and to the evaluation of resettlement applications in Kampala; they decipher the classification operations, the mechanisms of accountability or the creation of a professional identity among expatriate staff. They thus reveal the plurality and diversity of the contexts, procedures and agents that underpin the organisation's functioning, and they furnish a more fine-grained understanding of a number of specific facets of its activity. But the larger structural effects of this complex institutional activity often remain unexplored.

Based on embedded ethnography and analytical tools derived from anthropology and political sociology, the approach taken in this study is both empirical and encompassing. Its aim is to grasp the impact of the UNHCR's global activity during the 2000s on the basis of a study of its internal functioning.

Going to the core of the UNHCR's transglobal apparatus, following a key situation from within it, and then undertaking a process of distancing, deconstruction and contextualisation enabled me to bring several levels of analysis together: the micropolitics of practices, the institution as well as the multiscalar power relations that shape its environment and its organisation (relations that encompass, but are not limited to, the interstate system).

After a chapter that presents the theoretical and methodological context, this book is divided into two main parts. The first part (Chapters 2–6) explores the internal functioning of the UNHCR: the organisation's epistemic framework, its deployment across the globe, the main bureaucratic procedures underpinning it, and its agents (expatriate and so-called 'local' staff). The second part (Chapters 7–11) examines the UNHCR's work with Afghan refugees: the procedures used to identify 'refugees', the repatriation programme, the programme for reintegration in Afghanistan, the production of consistent narratives on Afghan mobility, and the administrative surveillance mechanisms the organisation put in place. Each of these chapters seeks both to understand an important aspect of how the UNHCR operates and/or wields its authority, and to grasp the complex and ambivalent, tense and entangled relationship that the organisation maintains with the interstate system.

Notes

1. In this study, I use the term 'migrant' in the sociological sense of a person who migrates. I therefore use it to denote all Afghans who migrate, including those who are the focus of the UNHCR's activity. When I use the term 'migrant' as a label in the context of immigration policy, I place it in inverted commas. For more on the institutional labelling of individuals who migrate, see Chapter 7.
2. This evaluation does not take Palestinian refugees into account, because they are the focus of a dedicated UN agency: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).