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Tsourapas, Gerasimos

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Credible fictions: how states stage refugee governance for geopolitical gain

Gerasimos Tsourapas*

School of Government, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author. School of Government, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom. E-mail: g.tsourapas@bham.ac.uk.

Abstract

How is refugee governance constructed for geopolitical gain? This article introduces the concept of *credible fictions* to theorize how states strategically curate aspects of refugee governance to appear as responsible partners. These fictions are not outright lies, but plausible distortions that produce legible signs of humanitarian strain and institutional responsibility. The article identifies three modalities: *illusions of scale*, in which population figures are exaggerated to amplify geopolitical relevance; *performative enforcement*, where control is symbolically enacted to signal responsibility; and *staged compliance*, in which policy metrics are curated to suggest implementation without structural reform. These practices allow states to preserve sovereign discretion while securing international recognition and material support, often with the tacit endorsement of international organizations. Rather than assessing veracity, the analysis centres on how credibility is constructed, by whom, and to what end. It reframes refugee rent-seeking as a practice grounded in visibility rather than outcomes, and highlights symbolic performance as a core strategy in migration diplomacy.

Keywords: refugee governance; migration diplomacy; refugee rent-seeking; geopolitics of migration; credible fictions; symbolic compliance.

1. Introduction—the politics of staged refugee governance

On 21 February 2023, President Saied declared that Tunisia faced a 'criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic landscape' through 'hordes of illegal migrants' from sub-Saharan Africa (Meddeb and Louati 2024). The statement sparked alarm in Europe and opened a new front in Tunisia's migration diplomacy. State officials and media outlets quickly amplified the narrative, citing inflated figures: some claimed over one million sub-Saharan migrants were residing illegally in Tunisia, nearly 8 per cent of the population (Parikh 2023); in contrast, international organizations estimated the number at just 30,000 to 50,000 (Blaise 2023). These inflated claims, though lacking in evidence, proved strategically useful. They helped pave the way for a €1 billion migration agreement with the European Union (EU), signed in July 2023, aimed at stemming irregular migration (O'Carroll 2023). After leveraging the language of emergency, Tunisian authorities proceeded to enact the very crisis they had constructed. 'Under pressure from Italy

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and the European Union,' Tunisian authorities launched a sweeping anti-smuggling campaign presented as a demonstration of control (Amara 2023). In reality, most of those arrested were migrants rather than smugglers; they were detained without due process, displaced from cities, or summarily expelled (Bouazza 2024). The statistics promoted in EU-facing communiqués blended fact and fiction: their significance had been carefully stage-managed. Likewise, what appeared to be decisive enforcement was, in practice, a choreographed response to a largely constructed crisis.

These scenes are no longer exceptional. From biometric registration drives to televised interceptions of migrant boats, governments now invest as heavily in the legibility of refugee governance as in its operations. This article introduces the concept of *credible fictions* to describe how states selectively construct aspects of their refugee and migration policy regimes to enhance recognizability, strategic value, and diplomatic leverage. These are not outright fabrications. Their force derives less from factual accuracy than from plausibility: they must merely appear accurate. The central argument is that states use credible fictions to convert refugee hosting and control into geopolitical value, with international organizations at times normalizing these dynamics. These take three dominant forms: *illusions of scale*, in which refugee numbers are exaggerated to amplify perceived burden; *performative enforcement*, where migration control is enacted symbolically to signal responsibility; and *staged compliance*, where curated metrics project successful implementation without structural reform.

Each credible fiction serves a dual purpose: it satisfies donor and partner expectations while preserving sovereign discretion over policy and implementation. These practices constitute a form of *refugee rent-seeking*, in which states extract political or material returns from hosting through discernible signs of burden, control, or compliance, and where legitimacy relies on recognition rather than substantive outcomes. The article examines three core cases: Uganda (illusions of scale), Egypt (performative enforcement), and Bangladesh (staged compliance). In Uganda, inflated refugee registration figures have helped sustain one of the world's most generously funded humanitarian responses, despite longstanding concerns over data inflation and beneficiary duplication. In Egypt, high-profile crackdowns on irregular migration have been timed to coincide with international summits, signalling compliance while obscuring persistent border informality and domestic exclusion. In Bangladesh, biometric registration and sectoral coordination metrics generate a visible, data-driven performance of humanitarian responsibility, even as legal recognition and rights remain absent or restricted. Supplementary cases include Mexico, Jordan, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, Greece, and other EU contexts, illustrating how these tactics of legibility and performance are adapted across distinct regional and institutional settings in both Global South and Global North environments.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first situates the argument within existing debates on forced migration, refugee rent-seeking, and migration diplomacy, drawing together strands on performance, strategic visibility, and credibility that have often been addressed in isolation. The second develops the concept of credible fictions, outlining its modalities and their logic of plausibility rather than strict verification. The third applies the typology to three core cases, tracing both variation and convergence across contexts. The conclusion reflects on how these practices reshape the symbolic economy of humanitarian practice, while extending analyses of refugee rent-seeking and migration diplomacy beyond transactional bargaining and into the representational strategies through which states construct credibility. The argument situates credible fictions as adaptive strategies within institutional frameworks that privilege appearance and recognition over substantive compliance. It seeks to clarify how states navigate structural asymmetries, constrained sovereignty, and conditional partnerships, rather than focusing on questions of culpability or the legitimacy of refugee aid. By analysing these performances critically yet empathetically, the article calls for engagement that addresses the underlying structural

dynamics, not merely their procedural outputs. Doing so may also help reorient donor practice towards more durable metrics of responsibility, rather than short-term signs of alignment.[1]

2. From hosting to signalling: rethinking refugee rent-seeking in a fragmented regime

The global refugee regime rests on institutional foundations that no longer reflect the scale or complexity of displacement today (Arar and FitzGerald 2023). Designed in the early Cold War era to manage temporary, politically legible flight, it now contends with protracted crises, mixed migratory flows, and containment strategies that far exceed its original remit (Chimni 1998; Loescher 2001). The 1951 Convention remains central to legal discourse, but practical protection depends on discretion, exception, and regional workaround. The result is a system in which obligations are minimal, enforcement is absent, and burden-sharing is shaped less by institutional design than by donor mood (Betts and Collier 2017). As displacement becomes more enduring, Global North states have turned to externalization, relying on financial inducement, political pressure, and logistical delegation to transit states (Anholt and Sinatti 2020; Arar 2023). These arrangements operate in legal grey zones, diffusing responsibility through offshore deals and distant enforcement (Lori and Schilde 2021). In effect, the geography of control has shifted: frontline states host, register, and deter, while distant powers retain authority over funding and recognition. What results is a fragmented regime in which visibility often matters more than compliance (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Martin and Tazzioli 2023; Fine 2023). While these dynamics are well documented, scholarship has paid less attention to how states actively construct new forms of leverage, reshaping refugee governance not through straightforward compliance or resistance, but through adaptation, mediation, and symbolic performance (Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008; Salehyan and Savun 2024).

States have converted gaps left by institutional erosion into instruments of control and geopolitical bargaining. Refugee policy has become a strategic domain of foreign policy, embedded in negotiations over aid, trade, and security (Lavenex 2006; İçduygu and Aksel 2014). Governments act as diplomatic entrepreneurs, leveraging proximity to migration routes as geopolitical capital and positioning themselves as indispensable partners in containment (Gazzotti 2022). This externalization of control has raised the diplomatic profile of transit states (Koinova 2025), enabling them to reframe negotiations and extract concessions (Laube 2021). Migration diplomacy is often analysed through the lens of strategic bargaining: who hosts, who funds, who gains (Tsourapas 2017; Vaagland 2023). But such analyses frequently treat refugee numbers, policies, and enforcement as empirical givens. In practice, these variables are staged, inflated, or selectively curated, as refugee management becomes a medium for broader issue linkage. States mobilize refugee presence as a versatile diplomatic resource, using it to secure aid for hosting as well as to negotiate debt relief, trade terms, security cooperation, and geopolitical attention (Liu-Farrer et al. 2024; Lefort-Rieu 2024). Aid thus functions less as a fixed incentive than as a contested resource, shaped by localization, obstruction, and self-presentation. States actively construct the appearance of cooperation, using signs such as plausible numbers, symbolic crackdowns, and staged generosity to influence perceptions (Neumayer 2005). These representations are central to how states negotiate, extract, and maintain their position within a fragmented regime, where visibility often substitutes for verification and linkage replaces obligation. Research on refugee carcerality further demonstrates that public displays of order, control, and humanitarian responsiveness are integral to how states secure funding and affirm legitimacy (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Martin and Tazzioli 2023).

[1] This article does not evaluate the empirical accuracy of refugee data, policies, or enforcement practices. Its concern lies not with the truth-value of individual claims, but with the political function of projecting plausibility, alignment, or responsibility. Credible fictions may at times reflect factual conditions, but their political significance lies in their institutional legibility and performative resonance. The aim is to theorize the politics of credibility, rather than to adjudicate its factual basis.

As refugee governance becomes increasingly state-led and diplomatized, hosting has emerged as a source of strategic value (Milner 2009; Betts and Collier 2017). Governments extract political and financial returns, often referred to as *refugee rents*, from hosting through threat, exposure, or diplomatic appeal (Tsourapas 2019; Micinski 2023). Classic examples include Jordan's recurring threat of institutional collapse, Türkiye's invocation of moral burden, and Lebanon's framing of national emergency. These practices are often read as bargaining tactics aimed at securing aid, debt relief, or diplomatic recognition. Yet over time, the appearance of generosity or crisis becomes as valuable as the underlying reality itself. States exaggerate numbers, delay verification, or stage registration drives to signal capacity and control (Lynch and Tsourapas 2024). Local actors also participate in representation politics, using refugee presence to elevate municipalities and access resources (Kihato 2025). Migrants, in this context, are strategically framed to maximize geopolitical returns and, in some cases, commodified as tools of negotiation (Freier et al. 2021). This extends to their integration into national development agendas under authoritarian rule (Lefort-Rieu 2024). While the rent-seeking literature acknowledges these strategies, it often leaves the symbolic and performative dimensions under-theorized. Projection here functions as a mode of governance: a practice that generates calibrated signs of compliance and capacity, and circulates effectively through donor reports, summit speeches, and diplomatic channels. In this space, performative strategies take root, and the logic of credibility begins to replace strict verification. Refugee hosting is enacted, staged, and selectively rendered legible.

3. Theorizing credible fictions: three modalities of visibility

This section theorizes the concept of *credible fictions* by developing a three-part framework that draws on scholarship in migration governance, state performance, and quantification. Each modality reflects a distinct but interlinked strategy through which states construct legibility for geopolitical return.

The politics of refugee numbers is well known, but their symbolic and strategic uses remain under-theorized. Crisp's early work diagnosed how states manipulate refugee statistics to attract international resources, but it leaves the broader logic of such practices analytically open (Crisp 1999). These were treated as distortions rather than techniques of rule. More recent scholarship has traced how host states use displacement to advance policy goals or extract aid; yet, this work often interprets official figures and gestures at face value, emphasizing institutional cooperation or programmatic outcomes rather than symbolic alignment (Betts 2021b). Analysts frequently overlook how states stage responsibility, calibrate burden, and simulate enforcement. These performances are noted but not theorized as migration statecraft. In practice, many states alternate between enforcement, inaction, and reform depending on external scrutiny and incentive structures. Even humanitarian inclusion may be selectively staged or extended in ways that appear generous while preserving political discretion and avoiding structural redistribution (Turner 2015; Norman 2024; Liu-Farrer et al. 2024). Increasingly, inaction and opacity are recognized as purposeful tools: forms of rule that defer responsibility, invite delegation, and sustain the appearance of order without full institutional engagement (Natter et al. 2023). These patterns indicate that performance becomes a method of navigating a fragmented regime that rewards discernibility over verification.

Migration diplomacy, in this view, is inherently performative. Critical scholars have long examined how state narratives, metrics, and interventions function as techniques of power rather than neutral representations, as have works on the politics of knowledge production (Walters et al. 2021; Aradau and Perret 2022; Marie Borrelli et al. 2022; Osseiran and Nimer 2024). State authority is enacted through symbolic forms, selective transparency, and what Foucault termed the 'truth-effect': the generation of authority through circulation, repetition, and institutional embedding.[2] These dynamics highlight how migration control is staged, how legibility is

[2] Foucault (1980) introduced the concept of the "truth-effect" to explain how certain statements come to be accepted as true not solely on empirical grounds, but because they are institutionally sanctioned, formally coherent, and discursively resonant. In the context of refugee governance, such effects arise when state representations, for example migrant counts, enforcement figures, or policy metrics, are framed in ways that align with dominant norms of legibility, credibility, and responsibility.

instrumentalized, and how documentation practices produce power. Visibility operates across levels, from global signalling to national posturing and subnational appeals for resources (Kihato 2025). States implement migration policies in ways that also perform them, generating curated signals of control and compliance designed to meet donor expectations.

Ferguson (1990) shows how development operates as an 'anti-politics machine,' demonstrating how technical interventions depoliticize policymaking while enhancing state legibility, often with minimal impact on underlying power structures. Li (2007) shows how the 'will to improve' legitimizes authority through staged acts of capacity and benevolence. In refugee contexts, these dynamics intensify. Host states operate under dual pressures: to appear responsible and to preserve sovereign discretion, creating fertile ground for symbolic strategies. Quantification studies further reveal that metrics, such as refugee counts, infrastructure numbers, or implementation statistics, enact institutional performance. Indicators shape institutional behaviour, frame donor assessments, and create incentives for strategic distortion (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Merry 2011). Numbers become technologies of rule, and in migration diplomacy, legibility often substitutes for accountability, as formal commitments are valued less for implementation than for their symbolic resonance (Tsourapas 2019). This dynamic extends beyond state actors: at the EU level, the very infrastructures of evidence production shape which forms of knowledge are recognized, which actors are legitimized, and how integration itself is rendered as both measurable and politically tractable (Dodevska 2024).

Building on these insights, the article introduces the concept of *credible fictions*: deliberate, donor-legible representations of refugee management that are plausible to external audiences yet strategically constructed to generate political or material advantage. These may involve inflated figures, staged enforcement, or curated metrics, but their defining feature is selective legibility rather than factual falsification. Credible fictions are not necessarily lies in the conventional sense. Rather, they are calibrated distortions: partial truths framed to appear comprehensive, metrics presented without context, or symbolic acts that convey responsibility without enforcing it. Their function is less to deceive than to resonate by producing a truth-effect, a representation that appears factual because it is timely, legible, and aligned with dominant frames of reference. They are crafted representations designed to meet donor expectations, evade scrutiny, and secure diplomatic recognition. Their credibility hinges on timing, form, and alignment with prevailing norms.

Credible fictions operate within a regime that rewards the appearance of institutional responsibility over its substantive enactment. By theorizing them as a patterned mode of engagement, the article extends existing work on migration diplomacy and refugee rent-seeking, which have largely focused on host-state leverage in coercive (*blackmail*) versus cooperative (*backscratching*) exchanges. Rather than treating displacement governance solely as a bargaining arena, it foregrounds the representational strategies through which states navigate a fragmented regime that lacks robust enforcement or coordination. This configuration suits donor states by enabling them to privilege appearances of alignment over deeper redistribution of responsibility. It also moves beyond existing accounts of symbolic compliance by theorizing visibility itself as a mode of governance, one in which curated signals substitute for institutional reform. The article develops a typology of three modalities: *illusions of scale*, in which hosting numbers are inflated to amplify perceived burden; *performative enforcement*, where symbolic acts of control substitute for systemic reform; and *staged compliance*, in which metrics of policy success are curated to sustain credibility. Together, these modalities capture how states govern displacement through signalling and curation, rather than solely through coercion or cooperation.

4. Methodology and case selection

This article develops a three-part typology of credible fictions in refugee governance: illusions of scale, performative enforcement, and staged compliance. For each modality, one anchoring case is selected to most clearly illustrate its underlying logic and empirical manifestation: Uganda for

illusions of scale, Egypt for performative enforcement, and Bangladesh for staged compliance. These cases are constructed as ideal-type illustrations (Ragin and Becker 1992) chosen for their conceptual clarity, empirical salience, and documentation in existing research, media investigations, policy reports, and official discourse. Supplementary examples, including Türkiye, Mexico, and a number of European and Arab states, serve to illustrate variation, convergence, and regional adaptation of these strategies across Global South and North contexts. In terms of temporal framing, the analysis primarily covers the 2015–25 period, marked by intensified donor engagement, strategic coordination, and a growing emphasis on external legibility in refugee governance. Historical data preceding 2015, particularly for Uganda, are included to provide context, but the primary longitudinal analysis remains within the 2015–25 frame. Supplementary cases are analysed over comparable periods, allowing the study to capture recurring patterns of strategic fabrication, representational politics, and rent-seeking across diverse geopolitical settings.

To construct the typology, each modality was identified through a set of observable indicators, supplemented by cross-regional examples to capture variation. Illusions of scale were examined by comparing official refugee registration figures with independent estimates, reviewing repeated donor communications, and noting instances where elevated numbers coincided with increased aid allocation. Performative enforcement was identified via the timing of enforcement actions, media emphasis on state control, and discrepancies between stated objectives and actual outcomes. Staged compliance was assessed through curated metrics and administrative outputs, signalling capacity and efficiency to donors while substantive legal protections remained limited. These operationalizations allow a systematic interpretive analysis, showing how states convert refugee governance into visible performances with political and material value.

In terms of data, the study draws on a combination of primary sources (government reports, policy documents, official statistics, and public statements) and secondary materials, including peer-reviewed scholarship, NGO analyses, and investigative journalism. Each source reflects distinct perspectives and priorities, which shape how refugee governance is framed and communicated. Triangulation across multiple source types enables attention to both the substantive and symbolic dimensions of state practice. While studies in migration and refugee governance often lament the absence of verifiable or comprehensive data, this analysis treats such opacity as analytically significant. Gaps, inconsistencies, and curated disclosures are read as expressions of the strategic logics under examination.[3] Interpretive judgements are made transparent: while the study does not claim empirical finality, it offers a structured account of representational strategies, policy performance, and strategic fabrication. Ethical considerations are addressed through reliance on aggregated or anonymized material, and through care to avoid misrepresentation or overgeneralization of refugee experiences.

Finally, the study follows an interpretive approach grounded in analytical generalization (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013; Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero 2018), oriented towards theory-building rather than hypothesis testing or causal inference. Case material is assessed for its contribution to understanding how states construct recognizability, credibility, and strain in order to secure international recognition, funding, or strategic leverage. A cross-case comparison logic underpins the typology: each core case demonstrates one modality, while supplementary cases provide illustrative variation and highlight how these modalities are adapted across differing geopolitical and institutional settings. Comparative criteria were applied consistently, focusing on observable indicators such as registration figures, enforcement actions, and curated metrics. This approach supports a systematic interpretation of patterns across contexts often coded as

[3] For instance, the Tanzanian government's periodic suspension of refugee registration in Nyarugusu camp, often without clear justification, has limited international oversight while maintaining eligibility for external support (Amnesty International 2021). Similarly, Algeria's refusal to permit full UNHCR access to Sahrawi camps in Tindouf has constrained verification processes while preserving its geopolitical posture on Western Sahara (Human Rights Watch 2014). This calls for a shift in scholarly orientation: rather than treating missing or inconsistent data as a methodological deficiency, researchers must interrogate how opacity functions as a strategic element of refugee governance. In this sense, what is absent or unverifiable may be as politically meaningful as what is documented.

either Global South or North. Yet the analysis also recognizes that many of the performative strategies observed transcend this binary: they reflect convergent practices emerging from structurally distinct positions within the global refugee regime. Methodologically, the typology is thus situated within the wider terrain of migration diplomacy, clarifying how performance functions as a mode of refugee governance and offering a conceptual vocabulary for analysing the performative logics that cut across otherwise disparate cases.

5. Making credible fictions work: scale, control, and staged compliance

Before turning to specific cases, we can disaggregate the forms that credible fictions take in practice. Despite variation in form, these fictions cluster around three recurring themes: exaggerated scale, symbolic control, and staged compliance. Each reflects a different facet of visibility: numbers that amplify burden, enforcement that dramatizes sovereignty, and metrics that simulate humanitarian performance. These modalities are explored in turn, showing how these distortions work not through outright lies, but through repetition, performance, and calibrated data. Table 1 provides a summary of the typology, core cases, observable indicators, and supplementary examples, highlighting how each modality manifests across diverse geopolitical contexts. The typology is not intended as a rigid classification. Modalities may intersect, evolve, or appear simultaneously within the same case. Jordan, for instance, combines elements of multiple modalities to maintain its standing as an indispensable partner for Western donors. Mexico likewise mobilizes a hybrid approach that balances enforcement optics with selective transparency. These examples underscore the need for interpretive flexibility when analysing performative refugee governance.

5.1 Illusions of scale: strategic inflation and the performance of crisis

Uganda provides a textbook example of illusions of scale, illustrating the strategic inflation of refugee and returnee figures to maximize geopolitical returns through refugee rent-seeking. In the lead-up to the Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA II) in 1984, the Obote government claimed that 300,000–400,000 Ugandans had voluntarily returned from Sudan and Zaire, using these amplified numbers to justify a $17 million request for reintegration aid (Crisp 1986). In reality, fewer than 50,000 had returned, motivated more by

Table 1. Modalities of credible fictions.

Modality	Core case	Observable indicators	Supplementary cases
Illusions of scale	Uganda	• Official refugee figures vs. independent estimates • Repeated reporting in donor communications • Numbers linked to aid allocation	Lebanon Jordan Egypt EU Member-States
Performative enforcement	Egypt	• Timing of enforcement actions (e.g., raids around summits) • Media emphasis on state control • Discrepancies between stated objectives and outcomes	Türkiye Mexico
Staged compliance	Bangladesh	• Curated metrics and administrative outputs (biometric registration, dashboards) • Indicators presented to donors signalling capacity and efficiency • Legal protections remain limited	Jordan European Union

Core and supplementary cases with observable indicators.

hardship in exile than by confidence in Uganda's stability. Crisp (1999) documents duplicative enumeration across borders: at the same conference, both Sudan and Zaire submitted funding requests for nearly the same population: Ugandan refugees who had not yet returned. This created a situation in which donors were asked to fund humanitarian assistance in Sudan and Zaire while simultaneously financing reintegration in Uganda. All three states thus performed humanitarian burden and responsibility in different ways to attract resources, demonstrating how illusions of scale can be co-produced across a regional political economy, rather than fabricated in isolation.

From 2013, worsening conflict in South Sudan triggered a mass exodus into northern Uganda, accelerating sharply after renewed violence in mid-2016. By 2017, Kampala's cooperation was seen as critical to providing a haven for hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese; an aid official noted that UNHCR appeared 'desperately cautious not to upset the Uganda government' (Parker 2018). That caution was tested in 2018, when Uganda and UNHCR became embroiled in a major corruption scandal. A donor-funded biometric verification exercise revealed that the official refugee count had been exaggerated by over 300,000 people. Internal audits by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services and whistleblower reports found that padded figures had justified bloated budgets, with aid funds misallocated or siphoned off by both Ugandan officials and humanitarian staff (Okiror 2018). The scale of the fraud prompted Germany to freeze $26 million in aid, and multiple UN and government officials were suspended (Mbiyozo 2019).

Even after the biometric clean-up, inflation and data opacity remained entrenched. A 2022 investigation revealed that UNHCR continued to rely on compromised registration systems, marked by weak oversight, fictitious beneficiaries, and discreet political pressure to maintain elevated figures (Titeca 2023). Uganda's reputation as a 'model refugee host' rested not solely on its open policy, but on its sustained projection of humanitarian exceptionalism. This carefully cultivated image converted directly into financial assistance, diplomatic capital, and international prestige (Betts 2021a). As one observer noted, Uganda 'was branded globally as the example to follow … Does that influence oversight and dissuade UNHCR from digging deeper and uncovering corruption and mismanagement? Who has leverage on whom?' (Titeca 2022). A donor-country ambassador put it plainly in 2019:

> 'We need a good example … It is really good for the debate. It is good for humanitarians; it is good for xenophobes […]. We maintain the narrative, otherwise we have no other narrative … There are many agendas and *unholy alliances*'. (quoted in Betts 2021a: 271, emphasis added)

The fabrication was not Uganda's alone. It emerged from overlapping incentives: while Uganda sought recognition and resources, international actors required a functional, success-oriented model of refugee governance. In this context, inflated figures were not only tolerated but also echoed and, at times, rewarded. Donor actors may have privately acknowledged the exaggeration, yet often treated it as a necessary, credible fiction: useful for preserving programmatic momentum, sustaining cooperation, or maintaining regional stability. As long as the figures remained within a zone of plausibility and Uganda continued to act as a cooperative partner, efforts at verification were deprioritized. They were deliberate distortions, carried forward across time and actors, designed to secure funding, legitimacy, and bargaining power. Their endurance stemmed from mutual expediency. Narrative coherence became more valuable than verification, and the performance of the humanitarian scale delivered returns for both host and donor. This dynamic complicates prevailing readings in international relations and security studies approaches to refugee politics, which often pathologize Global South states as either opportunistic actors instrumentalizing displacement or passive recipients devoid of agency. By foregrounding the co-produced nature of credible fictions, the analysis shifts attention from blame to mutual performance. Rather than a straightforward state-driven extraction of aid, Uganda's case illustrates how symbolic capital and reputational gain were secured alongside material assistance, and how governance was enacted, at least in part, through strategic self-presentation rather than programmatic delivery.

Arab states offer a distinct version of illusions of scale, characterized by calculated enumeration. In Jordan, while UNHCR registered approximately 670,000 Syrian refugees as of 2023, the government consistently claims to host around 1.3 million. This higher figure includes pre-2011 Syrian migrants, unregistered individuals, and others excluded from the UNHCR tally, reflecting a broader national definition of the refugee population. UNHCR registration services in Jordan were suspended in 2019, limiting opportunities for independent verification. Lebanon follows a similar pattern: with UNHCR registrations frozen since 2015 at around 800,000, Lebanese authorities regularly cite totals exceeding 1.5 million, and at times up to 2 million (Baylouny 2020). Egypt advances a comparable narrative. While UNHCR registered approximately 940,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of March 2025, Egyptian officials and media figures frequently cite figures of 'ten or eleven million guests' residing in the country (Tsourapas and El-Anis 2025). This expansive category conflates refugees, migrants, dual nationals, and long-settled populations. Although UNHCR continues to operate in Egypt, registration infrastructure has been periodically constrained by bureaucratic delays and access limitations.

Across all three contexts, inflated estimates are deployed rhetorically to highlight moral generosity while appealing for greater international support. Each state frames itself as a humane host operating under strain, invoking broad demographic claims to signal burden without extending formal rights, and to extract financial and diplomatic returns while deflecting institutional scrutiny. The contradiction is striking: while access to registration, and thus to legal protection, is often suspended or restricted, governments simultaneously deploy inflated figures to solicit recognition and resources for the very protection they limit. These discrepancies form part of a broader dramaturgy of migration diplomacy. As in the Ugandan case, international actors often collude in this theatre of excess, giving priority to regional cooperation and political stability over empirical verification. In the Arab context, illusions of scale operate through curated ambiguity, managed visibility, and the institutionalization of unverifiability as a governing technique.

In the context of the European refugee 'crisis', illusions of scale operated through the strategic performance of crisis. As Sigona (2015) observed, the release of arrival statistics played a central role in shaping debate and mobilizing securitized responses. Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, contributed to this inflation by double-counting entries, heightening the impression of an unmanageable flow. In the United Kingdom, symbolic amplification served a domestic agenda. By the summer of 2015, several hundred migrants across the Channel were described by then Prime Minister Cameron as 'swarms', fuelling public anxiety that far exceeded the actual scale of the phenomenon (BBC News 2015). In the Mediterranean, states such as Greece and Italy faced genuine operational strain, yet deliberately foregrounded reception bottlenecks to portray themselves as overwhelmed humanitarian gatekeepers. This staging served multiple functions: it secured emergency EU funds, justified appeals for burden-sharing, and prompted demands for increased Frontex deployments. Greece explicitly linked its reception role to broader requests for EU support, including financial relief and structural funding (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2022). In a pointed expression of frustration, Italy's Prime Minister Renzi told fellow EU leaders, 'If this is your idea of Europe, you can keep it' (Traynor and Watt 2015). These practices align with De Genova's concept of the 'border spectacle', in which state sovereignty is reaffirmed theatrically through portrayals of the border as besieged (Stierl et al. 2016). Here, illusions of scale were not directed at extracting humanitarian aid, but at staging the border as a zone of exception: a theatrical assertion of national authority that unlocked emergency funding streams and reinforced nationalist rhetoric. The inflation of figures became a performative technique of statecraft: a mode of enacting statehood in a Europe anxious about its loss.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that quantification contributes to the construction of displacement's political meaning. Across contexts as varied as Uganda, the Arab world, and the EU, statistical claims are assembled, repeated, and framed to support broader strategic aims. Whether deployed to signal burden, project generosity, or evoke crisis, such figures are rarely fabricated outright, yet they are calibrated to resonate with institutional expectations and donor

agendas. Illusions of scale are best understood not as deliberate deceptions, but as strategic distortions: numerical representations that gain authority through repetition, selective inclusion, and institutional tolerance. These dynamics resemble what Andreas (2000) calls a 'ritualistic performance,' namely a practice designed to measure while also staging a politics of urgency, presence, and control. This same logic extends beyond numbers to encompass the enactment of enforcement, discussed next below, where the appearance of control is produced through its carefully choreographed display.

5.2 Performative enforcement: repetition, spectacle, and the optics of control

Egypt has emerged as a central actor in Europe's migration diplomacy. Since 2022, Brussels has deepened its partnership with Cairo, culminating in a €7.4 billion agreement in 2024, of which €200 million was earmarked for controlling irregular migration (Van Moorsel and Bonfiglio 2024). Hosting approximately 940,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, Egypt occupies a position of symbolic importance: its geography and securitized posture enable it to function as a regional gatekeeper (Habersky et al. 2023). Within this configuration, the Egyptian government promotes a narrative of strict enforcement against smuggling. Yet these measures are often more performative than operational. As the independent Egyptian news outlet *Mada Masr* reports, migrant arrests regularly involve the same individuals charged multiple times, alongside reused mugshots and repeated case files (Hosny 2025). These operations rarely target the structural dismantling of smuggling networks. Instead, they sustain a visible posture of control, calibrated for external consumption rather than internal effectiveness.

This practice of detainee 'recycling' (*tadwīr al-qaḍāya*) is not confined to migration enforcement but forms part of a broader repertoire within Egypt's security apparatus, where it is routinely used to prolong detention without fresh evidence or charges (Anis 2021). During a 2022 riot at the Matrouh security camp, a detention facility near Egypt's western border with Libya, detainees protested continued incarceration despite formal release orders, only to be recharged with migrant smuggling. The camp commander reportedly explained: 'Just bear with it for a while, the European Union is causing trouble. You'll be released' (Hosny 2025). For those caught up in these cycles, the recycling of charges meant months of renewed detention without clarity or recourse. A database compiled by *Mada Masr* tracked 303 smuggling cases across 14 governorates between 2022 and 2024. While official records listed 1,368 defendants, closer analysis revealed only 759 unique individuals; the rest appeared in multiple cases. One man was named in ten separate indictments, another in nine. The outcome does not involve sustained legal action; rather, the production of a manufactured image of continual enforcement or, put differently, an optics-driven strategy grounded in repetition.

European actors have likewise remained silent on the detainee recycling strategy, not only because they benefit from its symbolic outputs, but because it reinforces the performative compliance on which donor partnerships depend. As in the Ugandan case, spectacle eclipses substance: the recycling strategy has become integral to broader EU–Egypt cooperation, where migration control serves as a central pillar of engagement. Italian Prime Minister Meloni hailed the 2024 agreement as a 'new model of cooperation between Europe and the southern shore of the Mediterranean' (Italian Government 2024), a formulation that reinforced her domestic bid to position migration control as the defining expression of national sovereignty. Far from facing censure for opaque or inflated practices, Cairo is rewarded: behind closed doors, Egyptian diplomats have continued to press for additional financial support, and government officials regularly cite the €6 billion promised to Türkiye in 2016 as a benchmark for appropriate compensation (Hosny 2025). In this context, enforcement functions as a mechanism for generating refugee rent, with the performance of control taking precedence over the actual disruption of smuggling networks.

In Türkiye, performative enforcement assumes the form of a choreographed spectacle. In November 2023, journalists were invited to witness a dramatic raid on a so-called 'shock house'

near the Iranian border, where Afghan migrants were reportedly squatting. The event was carefully staged: Van province governor Bilmez welcomed the press in advance and arrived on site with uniformed security forces (Stamouli 2022). Armed officers assembled in formation as local residents looked on. With cameras recording, police entered the building, where dozens of Afghan migrants, many of them children, were already kneeling in ritualized submission. Following the raid, Bilmez escorted journalists to the border fence, showcasing drone jammers, radar installations, and 103 watchtowers equipped with thermal cameras. A concrete wall, still under construction along the 295-km frontier with Iran, was introduced as the centrepiece of the enforcement infrastructure. In a televised interview, Interior Minister Yerlikaya described the initiative as 'the biggest deportation campaign of all time,' a statement intended to project sovereign control rather than convey policy detail (Ingleby et al. 2024). A local official later acknowledged, however, that 'the wall itself does not really have any impact' (Stamouli 2022).

The raid and its surrounding infrastructure functioned in tandem as a staged display of sovereign control. Enforcement activities are staged to reassure both Brussels and domestic constituencies, reinforcing Türkiye's image as a dependable containment partner while sustaining internal narratives of bureaucratic competence and strategic relevance. The performative logic extends beyond the eastern frontier: in 2024, the governor of Edirne announced plans for a new 8.5 km wall and additional fences along the European border, accompanied by electronic surveillance measures (Daily Sabah 2025). Given that both Greece and Bulgaria already maintain fortified barriers, this initiative was widely interpreted as a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive enhancement of enforcement capacity. Yet such spectacles feed an expanding security–industrial complex, as border construction and surveillance contracts convert the performance of control into material profit.

As in the Egyptian case, opaque or coercive practices are not penalized by donors. Ankara's ability to stage control, regardless of its legal or ethical basis, continues to attract external material and political support. Beyond public displays, enforcement extends into less scrutinized infrastructures, including EU-funded removal centres. Investigative reporting has documented systemic rights violations in these facilities: overcrowding, denial of legal assistance, physical abuse, and coercive 'voluntary return' procedures. As Lighthouse Reports (2024) notes, 'The EU is aware that it is funding this abusive system, with its own staff raising alarm about it internally. Yet senior officials choose to turn a blind eye.' The persistence of these violations reflects a shared logic: enforcement practices, even when abusive, are insulated from scrutiny so long as they produce the appearance of control and satisfy institutional expectations.

Mexico's migration enforcement has increasingly taken on a performative dimension, particularly along the southern border with Guatemala. Since 2019, under sustained pressure from the United States, Mexican authorities have conducted military-style crackdowns on migrant caravans. These operations are often orchestrated for public display. In one instance, filmed by the Associated Press, National Guard officers swept through a freight train and nearby hotels in Chiapas, detaining dozens of Central American migrants while cameras recorded the event (CBS News 2019). The emphasis was not solely on interdiction, but on staging a disciplined response. These spectacles generate limited operational outcomes: migrants are frequently released or rerouted, established smuggling corridors continue to function, and bussing migrants south has in some cases fuelled organized crime and insecurity in Chiapas. At the same time, Mexico's northern border has also become a theatre of enforcement, with the National Guard visibly patrolling urban crossings, staging raids, and projecting an image of sovereign control. Reports from Tijuana and other northern cities describe military-style displays that signal responsiveness to U.S. concerns while raising alarms about rights violations and local security impacts (Associated Press 2022). Similar dynamics are evident in Panama, where spectacle-based enforcement is likewise sustained despite its corrosive effects on security and rights.

In the short term, however, the optics proved effective. Uniformed raids, cordoned security zones, and televised deportations communicated alignment with U.S. border objectives, even as the broader security and human rights consequences were negative. As Fojas (2021) observes,

this constitutes an 'optical infrastructure' of enforcement: a theatrical configuration in which the appearance of control is prioritized over substantive change. These performances help sustain diplomatic alignment with the United States, which has responded with continued cooperation, public praise, and selective financial support. In July 2019, President Trump explicitly linked Mexico's visible crackdowns to the success of his own policies, declaring: 'We're very happy with the job they are doing… It was because of tariffs they are doing it' (Lucey and Pérez 2019). As in European partnerships with Egypt or Türkiye, symbolic border enforcement becomes mutually constitutive: a performance by one side, and a vindication for the other.

Taken together, the cases of Egypt, Türkiye, and Mexico illustrate how migration enforcement operates not only through coercion but through its orchestrated display. Egypt recycles legal charges to project resolve; Türkiye scripts media-accessible raids; Mexico choreographs crackdowns at key border zones. These actions are designed to convey order, responsiveness, and strategic alignment. Enforcement becomes a diplomatic instrument, tailored to external audiences and calibrated for symbolic effect. Like illusions of scale, these practices rely on repetition, selective visibility, and complicity from international partners, who benefit not despite their symbolic nature, but because the performances sustain the appearance of cooperation, control, and policy effectiveness. Their purpose is the production of legible governance: an optics of control that reassures partners, attracts resources, and reinforces claims to sovereignty. In contrast to staged compliance, which is discussed below as a mode of projecting managerial competence, performative enforcement privileges spectacle over substance.

5.3 Staged compliance: metrics, humanitarian visibility, and curated legitimacy

In Bangladesh, staged compliance takes the form of institutional projection that does not translate into legal change. Since 2017, the government has implemented one of the world's largest biometric registration efforts, documenting over 890,000 Rohingya in collaboration with UNHCR (Rahman 2024). This system, alongside Bangladesh's leadership in the Joint Response Plan (JRP) and sectoral coordination forums, has become central to the country's performance of humanitarian responsibility. The resulting outputs, including indicators in shelter, sanitation, and education, are technically detailed and prominently showcased to donors (Hossain 2024). Yet this technocratic infrastructure is not matched by a rights-based legal framework. Bangladesh remains outside the 1951 Refugee Convention, has no national refugee legislation, and explicitly rules out local integration as a long-term solution (Faulkner and Schiffer 2019). This stance reflects what has been described as the permanence of temporariness: Myanmar continues to reject Rohingya claims to belonging, while Dhaka resists integration for fear of creating a precedent that would invite further displacement or external pressure. In practice, performance emerges through bargaining with UNHCR and other international actors, whose negotiating space is constrained yet whose participation helps to confer credibility on donor-facing signals.

In this context, biometric registration and planning dashboards signal administrative order while concealing the absence of legal status or pathways to citizenship. The normative foundations of this infrastructure have also come under scrutiny. A 2021 investigation by Human Rights Watch revealed that UNHCR had shared biometric data with Myanmar authorities without securing informed consent from Rohingya refugees. Many were unaware that their data could be used to facilitate future repatriation (The New Humanitarian 2021). As one refugee recounted: 'We were told this was for aid; UNHCR did not tell us it would be used for anything linked to repatriations […] and then they never came back to us to ask if they could share our information' (Human Rights Watch 2021). The official designation of the Rohingya as 'Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals' underscores the same logic: it highlights their claim to Myanmar while simultaneously denying them the protections that refugee status would entail.

Viewed in this light, staged compliance in Bangladesh constitutes a credible fiction: not a fabrication, but a calculated performance of governance that aligns with donor expectations while deferring questions of durable rights. While some legal initiatives outside the Refugee

Convention framework have sought to expand protection, they remain marginal compared to the dominance of biometric and managerial instruments. Rather than signalling a deepening of protection, the infrastructure reflects a form of governance calibrated to external reassurance. Metrics function as instruments of aid coordination, political insulation, and reputational gain. Their credibility masks the absence of legal transformation and converts technical visibility into diplomatic value. As in previous cases, the delivery of durable outcomes is secondary to Dhaka's production of a recognizable script of cooperation. Staged compliance differs in tone, but not in function: it allows states to extract reputational and material benefits through curated transparency, with rights subordinated to the framework of administrative legibility.

In Jordan, staged compliance acquired institutional form through the 2016 Jordan Compact, which pledged up to 200,000 work permits for Syrians in exchange for development financing and relaxed EU trade access. The Compact reframed labour-market integration as part of a humanitarian–development bargain, presenting Syrian displacement as a development opportunity for Jordan's economic revitalization. By mid-2017, only around 60,000 permits had been issued, yet many were short-lived, duplicated, or counted cumulatively (Lenner and Turner 2019). Formal employment remained limited, while non-Syrian refugees, including Iraqis, Yemenis, and Sudanese, were excluded from benefits and in some cases subject to discriminatory treatment or return, to preserve the Compact's Syrian focus (Tsourapas 2019). The exclusionary approach is a calibrated rent-seeking strategy: refugee presence is leveraged to attract bilateral and multilateral support, while sovereignty over labour, mobility, and legal status remains intact. In this context, work permits function as visible tokens of cooperation, with limited utility as instruments of protection. Since 2016, Amman has also implemented biometric verification systems through partnerships with UNHCR and WFP, using iris-scanning technology to authenticate refugee identities at ATMs, clinics, and registration points (Abboud 2025). These systems enhance administrative efficiency and international credibility, yet they do not result in durable legal status or structural rights.[4] Staged compliance thus converts technical outputs into a substitute for legal inclusion, projecting governance while evading its substantive obligations.

In Greece and Italy, the EU Hotspot Approach represents a centralized form of staged compliance. Introduced in 2015 under the European Agenda on Migration, it was designed to accelerate identification, fingerprinting, and registration at key external borders. Through these procedures, frontline states signal alignment with international protection norms while advancing broader EU objectives of deterrence and control. The approach is underpinned by a dense set of technocratic instruments, including dashboards, throughput statistics, and case-processing indicators, which are routinely used to demonstrate institutional coordination and humanitarian responsibility. These metrics circulate widely among EU agencies and member-states, reinforcing the impression of a responsive and rules-based system. In practice, however, the hotspots have become sites of legal stagnation and administrative strain. Conditions of overcrowding, limited access to asylum procedures, and prolonged confinement persist across many facilities, yet remain obscured by the emphasis on operational efficiency. Protection is increasingly defined through biometric and procedural outputs at the expense of substantive legal safeguards. Within this logic, staged compliance operates through privileging what is visible, auditable, and legible, rather than through outright data fabrication. Institutional actors project effectiveness through numbers that resonate with donor expectations, while core questions of asylum reform, burden-sharing, and durable solutions remain largely unaddressed. The hotspot model sustains a governance architecture in which humanitarian legitimacy is constructed through metrics, even when structural protections fall short.

Taken together, these cases show that staged compliance allows states to perform governance without introducing substantive legal or structural reform. In Bangladesh, biometric

[4] Comparable biometric systems operate in Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab camps, where humanitarian encounters are similarly translated into auditable data. These systems raise tensions between service delivery and surveillance, and between visibility and rights (Iazzolino 2021).

registration and coordination metrics communicate institutional order while withholding rights. In Jordan, work permits and verification systems signal cooperation and inclusion, even as access to employment and protection remains limited. In the EU, hotspots transform fingerprinting, dashboards, and processing speed into tangible proxies for responsibility, despite persistent gaps in legal safeguards and asylum infrastructure. Across these settings, staged compliance depends on selective signalling and technical display, as outputs are calibrated to align with donor expectations and to project humanitarian responsibility. Through this modality, states extract symbolic capital and material support by performing care and competence within bounded terms. Its value lies in maintaining the appearance of order. Like other modalities of credible fiction, staged compliance allows states to convert institutional performance into leverage while preserving discretionary control.

6. Conclusion

As Wedeen's classic study of political performance observes (1999), politics often depends on citizens acting *as if* official narratives are real, even when disbelief is widespread; what matters is repetition, form, and recognizable staging. This article has examined how states use credible fictions to convert refugee governance into geopolitical value. These fictions are not necessarily fabrications in the conventional sense, but donor-legible distortions: plausible, calibrated signals of scale, control, or compliance at strategic moments. Whether through inflated registration figures, choreographed enforcement, or metrics that simulate policy success, these interventions operate as tools of international positioning. The cases analysed (Uganda, Egypt, and Mexico), together with broader references, demonstrate that this is not a regional anomaly. Rather, it forms part of a global repertoire of statecraft that transcends the Global South, though it is often most visible in settings where donor expectations, constrained resources, and geopolitical marginality converge to reward calibrated visibility over structural change.

This article is neither a call for donor retrenchment nor a blanket normative indictment of host-state practice. The presence of credible fictions reflects the perverse incentive structures embedded within the global refugee regime: in particular, the emphasis on coherence, quantifiability, and performative alignment as preconditions for support. In contexts of fiscal scarcity and geopolitical competition, states may resort to credible fictions not to deceive outright, but to remain audible within a crowded and conditional aid marketplace. Importantly, they are often co-produced across a wider governance ecology. Donors, humanitarian agencies, and international organizations frequently operate within institutional logics that reward visibility, scale, and apparent compliance, generating strong incentives to overlook, or even reproduce, distortions. Thus, these patterns reflect a structural configuration of the refugee regime that systematically privileges measurability, procedural coordination, and the appearance of accountability over legal transformation or meaningful protection. Recognizing the performative aspects of refugee governance should therefore prompt greater scrutiny of donor expectations and funding architectures, not their abandonment. It also requires sustained attention to the broader field of both state and non-state actors through which credibility is manufactured, circulated, and converted into value.

In reframing the politics of forced displacement, this article adds new texture to debates on refugee rent-seeking. Rather than treating symbolic acts as rhetorical excess or bureaucratic noise, it foregrounds them as strategic interventions: ways of making claims to credibility and value in a system that often rewards appearance over implementation. Crucially, it shows that power in migration policy flows not only from leverage or compliance, but from the ability to perform alignment, simulate capacity, and produce legible crisis. These techniques are central to how cooperation is staged, aid is unlocked, and international legitimacy is sustained. Yet these same logics often displace the lived experiences of migrants and refugees, whose protection needs are rendered secondary to the performance of governance. Understanding these configurations also requires attention to how displaced communities interpret, navigate, or contest

such performances, and how they participate in the circulation of visibility. Although this article centres on the institutional production of credible fictions, future research should consider how they are experienced and reshaped from below.

At stake is the interplay between governmental action and the ways global institutions allocate attention, credibility, and resources. Credible fictions reveal the symbolic economy that underpins migration diplomacy: an unholy alliance between host governments and international donors, in which metrics become mantras, legibility becomes labour, and compliance becomes choreography. Policy actors must engage this performative dimension more critically. This means recognizing how indicators of alignment can obscure rights deficits, and how donor incentives may inadvertently reward surface conformity over structural reform. Funding instruments, audit regimes, and partnership frameworks must be recalibrated to prioritize legal transformation and durable protection, not just procedural display. Independent verification, long-term incentives for reform, and a willingness to challenge confected metrics are essential. Without such adjustments, humanitarian practice risks becoming a stage for symbolic performance, rather than a system that protects those most in need.

Understanding these structures requires sustained attention to the representational logics that determine which performances are seen, validated, and converted into geopolitical return. This article has argued for a conceptual shift: from evaluating whether states are truthful or compliant to interrogating how credibility is produced, by whom, and to what ends. Credible fictions are intrinsic to how refugee management operates under conditions of structural constraint and international conditionality. As long as recognition is granted on the basis of curated performance, protection will remain partial, and accountability deferred. The challenge for scholars is to render these symbolic configurations analytically intelligible: to show how the politics of appearance shapes the allocation of rights, the distribution of resources, and the global governance of displacement.

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