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Asylum as Geopolitical Currency: Rents and Incentives in Contemporary Migration Governance

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Abstract

This article examines the political economy of asylum as an emergent logic reshaping the contemporary international refugee regime. Building on the post-War II foundations of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the analysis traces how escalating displacement, geopolitical asymmetries and governance externalization have progressively eroded the universalist, rights-based architecture of asylum. Through a reconstruction of the concept's theoretical lineage – introducing refugee rentierism and situating it within debates on rentier-state theory, migration diplomacy and global governance – the article argues that states increasingly convert the presence, containment or potential mobility of refugees into strategic rents. Drawing on a transdisciplinary framework that incorporates international political economy, global governance, international law and critical migration studies, the analysis maps a series of key cases – including the EU-Turkey Statement, EU partnerships with North African states, the UK-Rwanda plan, the Italy-Albania protocol, the Australia-Nauru offshoring model and recent U.S. initiatives in the Darién region. These practices reveal the instrumentalisation of refugees as geopolitical assets, enabling states to secure financial transfers, diplomatic concessions or domestic political capital while outsourcing protection obligations to peripheral regions. Normatively, the rise of refugee rentierism undermines the authority of international law, entrenches global inequalities and accelerates the delegalization and fragmentation of the asylum regime. The article concludes that refugee rentierism is not a marginal trend but a structural transformation that shifts asylum from an inalienable right to a transactional instrument, challenging the future viability of a universal protection system and calling for renewed commitments to global justice, solidarity and responsibility-sharing.

Keywords: Refugee Rentierism; Political Economy of Migration; Border Externalization; International Financial Trends; Asylum Governance; Geopolitical Bargaining

1. INTRODUCTION: Refugees as A Strategic Currency

The international refugee protection regime emerged from the institutional and moral wreckage of the Second World War. Grounded in the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, it responded to the failure of the international community to protect people fleeing Nazi persecution. The Convention established a binding normative and legal architecture designed to insulate the right to asylum from political discretion. Its foundational principle – that asylum constitutes a universal and non-negotiable right – reflected a commitment to transforming the moral catastrophe of the 1930s and 1940s into a durable legal obligation [1,2]. The regime's aspiration was clear: the protection of displaced persons should constitute a shared international responsibility, anchored in the idea that human dignity and non-refoulement rise above the territorial interests of states [3].

Over the past decades, however, this normative architecture has come under severe strain. A combination of protracted conflicts, new forms of violence, climate-related disasters and authoritarian retrenchment has dramatically expanded global displacement, producing both unprecedented mobility and unprecedented precarity [4,5]. At the same time, many states – particularly in the Global North – have undertaken a systematic reshaping of asylum governance. Rather than responding to rising protection needs by strengthening institutions and ensuring equitable burden-sharing, governments have

progressively hollowed out the universalist aspirations of the post-war regime [6-8]. The result has been a shift from protection to exclusion. Asylum is now increasingly managed through logics of containment, deterrence and border externalization, whereby responsibility is displaced onto peripheral or transit countries [9,10].

In this emerging landscape, asylum has undergone a profound transformation – from a legal obligation embedded in international law to a negotiable instrument within a broader political economy of migration governance. The rise of offshore detention regimes, extraterritorial migration controls and securitized partnership agreements reveals a structural trend: the re-commodification of protection and the redefinition of refugees as objects of geopolitical exchange [11].

The concept of refugee rentierism captures this shift. It describes how the states convert the presence of refugees – traditionally understood as an economic burden or humanitarian responsibility – into a form of geopolitical capital [12,13]. Host and transit states increasingly leverage displaced populations to extract financial transfers, political recognition, security cooperation or diplomatic concessions from external actors eager to prevent the onward movement of asylum seekers. Through bilateral and regional deals, the management of refugees becomes a strategic asset: states negotiate their “migration control” services in exchange for funding, legitimacy or influence in international forums [14].

Although most visible in interstate negotiations, refugee rentierism is shaped by a wider set of actors. International organizations – such as UNHCR, IOM, and development banks – act as mediators, channeling resources and providing technical support that can inadvertently legitimize externalization. Humanitarian NGOs may also reinforce rentier dynamics by delivering services that soften the political costs of containment. Alongside them operate private-sector actors – security firms, logistics companies, and surveillance-technology providers – that profit from and entrench the marketization of borders, fueling a “migration-industrial complex” [15]. At the same time, resistance emerges from below: diaspora networks and local civil-society groups document abuses, mobilize across borders, and expose how states capitalize on displacement.

Seen through this broader constellation of actors, refugee rentierism is not simply the outcome of intergovernmental bargaining. It is a dispersed political economy, multi-layered, multi-sited, and sustained by a wide network of intermediaries and beneficiaries.

The concept draws on the classic literature on rentier states, first articulated by Mahdavy [16] and expanded in studies of Middle Eastern political economy [17,18]. Classical rentierism describes political systems sustained not by internal taxation, but by external rents derived from natural resources, foreign aid or strategic rents. When applied to migration sphere, this logic shifts: the “rent” no longer derives from the extraction of oil or gas, but from the containment, management or even the threat of release of displaced populations. Refugees thus become a strategic currency, whose value stems from the willingness of external actors to pay in preventing their movement.

Building on this analytical framework, this article examines how refugee rentierism is reshaping the nature, distribution and legitimacy of contemporary asylum systems. It advances three contributions.

1. Theoretical reconstruction: It traces the intellectual genealogy of refugee rentierism, situating it within the literatures on migration diplomacy, international political economy, externalization and global governance. The analysis draws on the work of Gibney [19], Gammeltoft-Hansen & Hathaway [7], Lavenex [20] and Tsourapas [12,13], among others.

2. Empirical mapping: It analyzes a diverse set of cases – including the EU-Turkey Statement, the EU’s agreements with Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania, the UK-Rwanda partnership, the Italy-Albania protocol, Australia’s offshore regime in Nauru and Papua New Guinea and recent U.S. strategies in the Darién region – to demonstrate how refugee rentierism materializes in economic, political and symbolic forms across different regions.

3. Normative and systemic implications: It assesses how these practices erode the universality of refugee rights, undermine the authority of international law and marginalize multilateral institutions such as UNHCR. The article argues that refugee rentierism signals a structural shift from a rights-based regime to a transactional system governed by geopolitical incentives rather than legal obligations.

Taken together, these elements reveal not merely a policy trend but a deep transformation in the global governance of forced displacement, with far-reaching consequences for international law, humanitarian norms and the ethics of protection.

2. Conceptualizing Refugee Rentierism: Theoretical Foundations and Contemporary Dynamics

Refugee rentierism refers to the strategic use of refugee populations by states that host, intercept or otherwise control them. Rather than viewing displaced populations solely as humanitarian responsibilities, such states deploy them as instruments of political leverage vis-à-vis actors in the Global North. This dynamic has been conceptualized most prominently in the work of Gerasimos Tsourapas [12,13], who demonstrates that states situated along major migratory corridors – such as Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco – have developed increasingly sophisticated forms of migration diplomacy. These states capitalize on their capacity to regulate, restrict or facilitate cross-border mobility, using migration management as a tool of foreign policy and regime maintenance [21,22].

Unlike classical forms of rentierism, which depends on natural-resource extraction or other external revenues, refugee rents originate from retention rather than extraction. Their value emerges precisely because external actors perceive refugee arrivals as a political, social or security threat. Preventing these arrivals therefore acquires geopolitical value. Hosting, policing or detaining refugees become a tradable service in international politics [7,10]. As a result, what appears domestically as a burden becomes internationally an asset, capable of yielding financial transfers, diplomatic concessions or strategic partnerships.

When applied to migration governance, the rentier-state framework clarifies how governments convert refugee presence into diplomatic capital and external revenue. States negotiate cooperation on border control, asylum processing and migrant containment in exchange for development aid, security cooperation, debt relief or preferential trade agreements [4]. Asylum becomes embedded in the marketized logic of migration externalization, where protection is not guaranteed by law but negotiated through bilateral deals, memoranda of understanding and securitized partnerships [9,23].

Recent academic debates on refugee rentierism highlight two major interpretive strands.

First, a functionalist view presents rentierism as an almost inevitable outcome of an asymmetric global governance system in which peripheral states leverage their positional advantage within unequal power hierarchies [13,24]. According to this perspective, the commodification of refugee management reflects rational state behaviour in a world where global mobility is politicized and external actors are willing to pay for containment.

Second, a critical perspective warns that refugee rentierism erodes the universality of asylum rights, transforming protection into a transactional good subject to political price-setting and geopolitical expediency [6,19]. These scholars argue that the trend undermines international refugee law, entrenches global inequalities and enables donor states to outsource coercive practices to third countries while evading accountability.

Together, these debates underscore that refugee rentierism is neither a marginal nor an episodic phenomenon. Instead, it constitutes a structural feature of contemporary migration governance, exposing the growing tension between asylum's humanitarian foundations and the geopolitical incentives that now shape it.

Although the concept has been studied mostly qualitatively, refugee rentierism can be operationalized through measurable indicators across economic, political and symbolic dimensions.

Economically, researchers can trace financial flows linked to migration management: the size and composition of transfers tied to control measures, shifts in development assistance or macro-financial support after migration deals, and the extent to which national budgets depend on migration-related funding.

Politically, rentier dynamics appear in shifts in diplomatic alignments, changes in voting behaviour in international forums, concessions secured in parallel domains such as trade or visa policy, and the strategic use – or threat – of migrant release as leverage.

Finally, the symbolic dimension emerges in how migration is narrated and instrumentalized within domestic political discourse: the frequency with which migration governance appears in public debate; the use of deterrence-oriented narratives; and the reputational gains or branding strategies pursued by transit and host states.

Together, these indicators support cross-national comparison and could form the basis of an “index of rentier intensity,” enabling future research to move beyond qualitative analysis toward mixed-method approaches. Such an approach, however, remains entirely experimental: no systematic attempt to

operationalize refugee rentierism in this way has yet been undertaken, and the proposal offered here is only a preliminary sketch. Its feasibility and analytical value can be assessed only through future, more structured research programs: programs that would require dedicated time, interdisciplinary collaboration and adequate funding commensurate with the scale and significance of the task.

3. Global Cartographies of Rent: Empirical Configurations of Refugee Rentierism

Far from being an anomaly, refugee rentierism has become a structural feature of contemporary migration governance across diverse geopolitical contexts. Its empirical manifestations vary according to regional politics, state capacity and the nature of bilateral partnerships, yet the underlying logic remains constant: refugees are recast as geopolitical assets and their management becomes exchangeable on what scholars have termed a transnational market of responsibilities [7,10]. In this market, states negotiate financial transfers, security cooperation or diplomatic concessions in return for containing or hosting displaced populations. What follows is a comparative mapping of key cases that exemplify this dynamic.

3.1. European Union-Turkey (2016)

The EU-Turkey Statement¹ represents one of the clearest and most institutionalized examples of refugee rentierism. Signed in March 2016 and initially valued at €6 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, the agreement epitomizes transactional migration governance. In exchange for hosting over 3.6 million Syrian refugees and curbing departures toward Greece, Ankara secured substantial financial transfers, renewed diplomatic relevance and leverage in EU accession and visa liberalization processes [25]. Beyond the immediate financial package, the deal normalized a delegated border-management model, whereby the EU externalizes responsibility for asylum processing to a non-member state in return for monetary and political concessions.

This arrangement created a structural environment in which refugees became assets convertible into strategic rents, allowing Turkey to extract political, economic and diplomatic benefits from its role as Europe's "buffer zone". Scholars note that the Statement not only strengthened Ankara's bargaining position vis-à-vis Brussels, but also enabled domestic political uses of the refugee file, reinforcing Turkey's image as a regional humanitarian power and legitimizing the government's broader foreign-policy agenda.

The 2020 border crisis – when Turkey briefly declared that refugees were "free to cross" into Europe – demonstrated the strategic utility of refugees as bargaining tools [13]. By orchestrating a controlled relaxation of border enforcement, Ankara effectively weaponized mobility, signaling its capacity to influence EU politics and public opinion. This episode made explicit the asymmetric interdependence at the core of the EU-Turkey relationship: Europe's reliance on Turkey's containment capacity amplified Ankara's leverage, allowing it to convert refugee management into geopolitical capital. The crisis also exposed the fragility of EU externalization strategies, highlighting how reliance on third-country partners can generate vulnerabilities rather than stability.

3.2. Lebanon (2024)

Lebanon, confronting one of the world's worst economic collapses, has increasingly instrumentalized its 1.5 million Syrian refugees as leverage in negotiations with international donors. The 2024 EU-Lebanon agreement², valued at €1 billion, links financial assistance to enhanced border control and reduced departures across the Mediterranean. Despite mounting concerns about forced deportations, arbitrary arrests and escalating xenophobic rhetoric, the EU's engagement has arguably reinforced the government's international legitimacy.

Lebanon's case illustrates how fragile states transform refugee hosting into a survival strategy, extracting economic rents while deflecting domestic demands for reform. Within this framework, Lebanese political elites have strategically framed refugee governance as both a burden warranting compensation and a bargaining chip in wider geopolitical negotiations. By presenting themselves as an

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

² https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/lebanon_en.

indispensable buffer preventing large-scale migration to Europe, they shift the focus of international diplomacy away from governance failures and toward stabilization funds. This strategy allows ruling factions to preserve patronage networks and delay substantive policy change while maintaining steady inflows of external assistance.

The securitization of the refugee issue has also become a useful instrument for political consolidation. Successive governments have invoked national security imperatives to justify crackdowns, expand the authority of security agencies and redirect popular frustration toward a vulnerable population. This dynamic fuels a cycle in which worsening socio-economic conditions intensify anti-refugee sentiment, which in turn reinforces the state's narrative of indispensability in managing a permanent "crisis" [26].

Meanwhile, donors face a persistent paradox: while aiming to uphold humanitarian principles and promote stability, their funding practices often entrench illiberal governance. By prioritizing containment and migration control, external actors favor short-term political expediency over long-term structural reforms, reinforcing a system in which refugee hosting becomes a transactional asset rather than a rights-based responsibility.

In this context, asylum operates less as a protection mechanism and more as geopolitical currency, traded, negotiated and leveraged by states navigating economic fragility and regional pressures. The outcome is profoundly paradoxical: Lebanon categorically refuses integration, Europe effectively limits resettlement and return narratives sustain a system of containment and rent-seeking through two seemingly contradictory processes, publicly showcasing policy engagement while simultaneously restricting its implementation [27].

3.3. Tunisia³, Egypt⁴, Mauritania⁵ (2023-2024)

The EU's recent partnerships with Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania reflect the broader trend of outsourcing migration control to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments. These agreements, financed through EU development and macroeconomic assistance tools, exchange debt relief, budgetary support and diplomatic recognition for intensified policing of migration routes in the Central and Western Mediterranean [20]. Human rights organizations have documented wide-ranging abuses in these states, including arbitrary detention, collective expulsions and racialized violence – raising concerns that EU externalization indirectly sustains coercive domestic practices. Here, refugee rentierism intersects with authoritarian consolidation, as governments use migration control to secure international support while repressing vulnerable populations [28].

Beyond their immediate security rationale, such arrangements illustrate how migration governance becomes embedded within a transactional logic of geopolitical bargaining. By presenting themselves as indispensable gatekeepers, partner governments leverage Europe's political anxieties to renegotiate asymmetric relationships with Brussels, extracting financial flows and diplomatic concessions that might otherwise remain inaccessible. This dynamic transforms asylum seekers and migrants into strategic assets whose containment generates recurring political and material dividends. Crucially, it also blurs the boundary between development cooperation and security provision, as funds nominally allocated for socio-economic stabilization are repurposed toward surveillance, border infrastructure and internal policing [29].

Moreover, the EU's reliance on these states introduces a form of moral hazard: leaders who benefit from external rents tied to control of mobility have little incentive to pursue durable governance reforms and may instead amplify conditions (economic precarity, political repression or selective border laxity) that keep Europe dependent on their cooperation. In this sense, migration becomes a renewable resource within authoritarian political economies, reinforcing patronage networks and legitimizing coercive capacities under the guise of "managing flows". For the EU, the short-term gains of reduced arrivals come at the cost of entrenching illiberal actors and eroding the normative foundations of its own asylum regime. For migrants, the result is a landscape in which protection is subordinated to strategic calculus and where the promise of asylum is increasingly mediated by bargains struck far beyond Europe's

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.

⁴ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/egypt_en.

⁵ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/eu-mauritania-joint-declaration_en.

borders. In this way, through the externalisation of migration control, the EU is not only delegating migration management but also risks becoming complicit in serious human rights violations [30].

3.4. United Kingdom-Rwanda (2022)

The UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership⁶ represents a paradigmatic case of symbolic or performative rentierism. Despite expenditures exceeding £300 million – with no asylum seeker ever relocated as of 2025 – the agreement served primarily as a domestic political performance for the UK government, signaling toughness on irregular migration and appealing to key electoral constituencies. The scheme's very announcement operated as a deterrent spectacle, enabling ministers to claim decisive action while externalising blame for implementation failures onto courts, international norms or opposition parties. In this sense, the anticipated functionality of the partnership, rather than its material outcomes, became the core asset converted into political value.

For Rwanda, the agreement provided both substantial financial transfers and heightened international visibility as a putative provider of innovative humanitarian solutions, reinforcing its longstanding strategy of projecting itself as a reliable and pragmatic partner to Western governments [31]. Kigali capitalised on the partnership to bolster its diplomatic profile, diversify its external rents and reposition itself within global migration governance as a capable host state despite persistent concerns regarding domestic political freedoms and human rights. The reputational gains were thus closely intertwined with broader geopolitical objectives, including regime consolidation and the cultivation of strategic alliances.

Taken together, the partnership illustrates how political symbolism – rather than operational functionality – generated the rent. Both parties extracted value from the performative dimensions of the agreement: the UK in the currency of domestic political legitimacy and Rwanda in the currency of international recognition and material side-payments. The episode underscores the extent to which contemporary migration governance can function as a marketplace for geopolitical signalling, where states trade in narratives of control, responsibility and humanitarianism as much as in the actual movement or protection of people.

3.5. Australia-Nauru/Papua New Guinea (2001)

Australia's offshore processing regime – first instituted in 2001 and reinvigorated in 2012⁷ – constitutes one of the most extreme forms of refugee rentierism. The Australian government has spent billions of dollars to warehouse asylum seekers in remote island states, where systematic human-rights violations have been documented by UN agencies and NGOs [32]. For Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG), hosting detention centres generated vital economic rents, including infrastructure investments, employment for local populations and diplomatic patronage. For Australia, the regime allowed the state to project border control sovereignty while outsourcing the coercive components of asylum governance – an archetypal case of “cooperative deterrence” [7].

Beyond these immediate material exchanges, the scheme also reshaped regional political economies by entwining migration control with broader strategic calculations. For Nauru and PNG, the asylum infrastructure became a cornerstone of their fiscal stability, reducing incentives to pursue alternative development paths and deepening structural dependence on Australia's security agenda. This dependency translated into heightened diplomatic alignment: both states routinely supported Australian positions in regional fora, revealing how asylum governance can be instrumentalised to consolidate influence in the Pacific. At the same time, the regime served crucial symbolic functions for Australia's domestic politics. Successive governments leveraged offshore processing to signal resolve to voters and to reassert territorial sovereignty in a context of perceived irregular-migration crises, thereby converting migration control into a form of political capital. The result was a mutually reinforcing arrangement in which humanitarian obligations were subordinated to strategic and electoral incentives, demonstrating how asylum can be mobilised as geopolitical currency across multiple scales: from local labour markets to regional alliances and national political narratives.

⁶ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9568/>.

⁷ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ending-arbitrary-and-indefinite-offshore-detention/>.

In sum, Australia's offshore processing regime amounts – according to several scholars – to an outsourced system built on documented abuses [33] and deliberately engineered for migratory deterrence and geopolitical leverage [34], with the 2025 UN Human Rights Committee ruling underscoring that extraterritorial outsourcing does not absolve the state of responsibility⁸.

3.6. United States-Colombia/Panama (2024)

As record numbers of migrants traverse the Darién Gap⁹, Washington has deepened security, humanitarian and development cooperation with Colombia and Panama in exchange for stricter enforcement and containment measures¹⁰. This trilateral strategy reflects a growing trend in the Americas: the fusion of humanitarian assistance with security objectives and geopolitical concerns [35]. In practice, such arrangements allow the United States to instrumentalize aid – whether financial, technical or diplomatic – as a form of geopolitical currency, designed to elicit compliance from transit states and redirect responsibility for managing mixed migration flows. By offering targeted support for border policing, refugee registration systems and humanitarian logistics, the United States effectively shapes the priorities and capacities of its partners, steering them toward enforcement-oriented approaches that align with U.S. domestic political imperatives.

The arrangement reveals a model of asymmetrical burden-sharing, whereby Global South transit states shoulder the humanitarian consequences of displacement while the United States secures its borders through external partnerships. In this model, Colombia and Panama accrue certain strategic rents – such as increased development funding, technical assistance and diplomatic favor – yet these rents rarely offset the political, social and infrastructural pressures generated by sustained mobility through their territories. What emerges is a hierarchical governance landscape in which states at the periphery absorb the immediate costs of displacement, including protection obligations and local service provision, while the core state leverages its superior bargaining power to externalize migration management beyond its territorial boundaries [36]. This dynamic underscores the broader geopolitical logic of contemporary migration governance: asylum and mobility control become transactional instruments, negotiated between states of unequal power in ways that reshape regional responsibilities and redefine the valuation of humanitarian commitments.

However, such externalization strategies – including the trilateral cooperation with Colombia and Panama – come with real limits: they don't stop migration flows; they merely shift them or push them into more dangerous routes. This underscores the argument that treating asylum as “geopolitical currency” simply exports the costs elsewhere while doing little to address the underlying drivers of displacement [37].

3.7. Italy-Albania (2023-2024)

The Italy-Albania protocol¹¹ represents a distinctively European iteration of refugee rentierism, crystallizing the ways in which asylum governance has become embedded in broader geopolitical bargaining. The agreement enables Italy to process asylum claims on Albanian territory, effectively establishing an extraterritorial asylum zone insulated – though not formally exempt – from EU jurisdictional scrutiny. In return, Albania is promised substantial infrastructure investments, enhanced security cooperation and a visible acceleration of its symbolic and material integration into the EU enlargement framework. Initially, the arrangement provides for the transfer to Albanian territory of asylum procedures concerning individuals rescued at sea by Italian vessels, who are then held and processed in facilities built, financed and administered by Italy (namely non-vulnerable asylum seekers originating from “safe countries of origin”). After the judiciary's rejection, the protocol was further expanded in May 2025 to encompass individuals already subject to removal orders and previously detained in Italy's Centri per il rimpatrio (CPR). This expansion underscores the elasticity of the scheme and its capacity to absorb new categories of migrants in response to domestic political pressures.

Remarkably, the deal was accompanied by the sudden conclusion of a long-stalled bilateral social security treaty – approved with unusual speed after years of diplomatic inertia – thus revealing the

⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/australia-responsible-arbitrary-detention-asylum-seekers-offshore-facilities>.

⁹ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/108940>.

¹⁰ <https://www.dhs.gov/archive/news/2024/08/26/joint-statement-trilateral-irregular-migration>.

¹¹ <https://temi.camera.it/leg19/provvedimento/protocollo-italia-albania-in-materia-migratoria.html>.

explicitly transactional nature of the bilateral package. Through this constellation of agreements, Italy thus opens a new pathway for the externalization of asylum procedures – albeit one that, for now, operates on very small numbers – effectively offloading the political, administrative and humanitarian costs associated with asylum processing. Albania, in turn, capitalizes on its strategic position as a “buffer state” to secure concessions, heightened diplomatic visibility and substantial financial rents.

In this sense, the 2023-2024 Italy-Albania Protocol embodies three constitutive mechanisms of contemporary refugee rentierism: (1) the transformation of international protection into a tradable political commodity, governed less by legal obligation than by reciprocal advantage; (2) the international legitimization of a third-country government in exchange for its willingness to assume functions of containment, deterrence and migrant management on behalf of a wealthier state; and (3) the instrumentalization of asylum law as a bargaining chip in interstate negotiation, rather than as a normative system designed to safeguard individual rights.

Far from being an isolated episode, the Italy-Albania arrangement is thus part of a broader European trajectory of border externalization, in which refugees become units of geopolitical currency and core legal safeguards are reframed as contingent variables within power-asymmetric negotiations. The financial dimension of the protocol further illuminates its rentier logic: the Albanian facilities ultimately absorbed close to one billion euros in Italian public expenditure, despite their extremely limited and episodic functionality. Transfers remained minimal, operational delays were persistent and the enforcement of removal orders still required passage through Italian territory, thereby undermining the very rationale of the externalization scheme. In practice, the protocol generated high symbolic returns for both governments while delivering uncertain policy outcomes and raising profound concerns regarding accountability, legal responsibility and the erosion of asylum as a rights-based institution.

Currently, however, the future of the centres in Albania lies in the hands of the courts: most notably the Italian Court of Cassation, which has questioned the legality of the scheme, and the Court of Justice of the European Union, which must now determine whether the procedures and forms of detention envisaged by the protocol are compatible with EU law¹².

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Refugee Rentierism Across Regions

Geopolitical Case (Year)	Nature of the Agreement	The “Rent” (What the host state gets)	Strategic Logic and Results	Notes and Critical Issues
European Union - Turkey (2016)	EU-Turkey statement: Outsourcing border management and containing more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees.	€6 billion initially, diplomatic relevance, leverage in EU accession processes and visa liberalisation.	“Buffer Zone” model: Refugees become assets that can be converted into geopolitical capital. Turkey uses mobility as a weapon (e.g. 2020 crisis) to negotiate with Brussels.	It creates asymmetrical interdependence: the EU’s dependence on Turkey increases Ankara’s bargaining power.
Lebanon (2024)	EU-Lebanon Agreement: Financial assistance linked to border control and the reduction of departures in the Mediterranean.	€1 billion. International legitimacy for political elites and stabilization funds despite the economic collapse.	Survival Strategy: Refugees (1.5 million) are used as leverage to obtain funds (“Rent”) and divert attention from internal reforms.	Donor paradox: Financing stability reinforces illiberal and xenophobic governance without resolving structural causes.
Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania (2023-2024)	EU Partnerships: Outsourcing migration control to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments in the Central/Western Mediterranean.	Budget support, debt relief, diplomatic legitimacy and funds for security infrastructure.	Authoritarian consolidation: Governments use migration control to gain international support while suppressing domestic dissent.	“Moral Hazard”: Leaders have no incentive to resolve crises, as the EU’s dependency ensures continuous flows of money.

¹² <https://unipd-centrodirittoimmigrati.it/en/topics/the-court-of-justice-of-the-eu-puts-the-breaks-on-the-externalisation-in-albania-of-asylum-procedures-by-imposing-a-judicial-control-on-the-safe-state-of-origin-designation-the-c-75824-and-c-75924-judgment-1-august-2025>.

Table 1 (Continued). Comparative Overview of Refugee Rentierism Across Regions

Geopolitical Case (Year)	Nature of the Agreement	The “Rent” (What the host state gets)	Strategic Logic and Results	Notes and Critical Issues
United Kingdom - Rwanda (2022)	Migration Partnership: Agreement to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda (no transfers made by 2025).	Over £300 million for Rwanda + international visibility as a “reliable” partner.	Performative Rentierism: The agreement generates symbolic political value (a sign of harshness for the UK electorate) regardless of its operational functionality.	Exchange of narratives rather than people: Rwanda gains legitimacy and diversifies revenue; the UK externalizes the blame for failures.
Australia - Nauru / New Papua Guinea (2001, 2012)	Offshore Processing: Detention of asylum seekers in remote Pacific islands (“Pacific Solution”).	Billions of dollars in infrastructure investments, local employment and diplomatic patronage.	Cooperative Deterrence: Australia projects sovereignty by outsourcing coercion. For Nauru/PNG, asylum becomes the basis of fiscal stability.	Structural dependency: Nauru and NPCs diplomatically align themselves with Australia. Documented systematic human rights violations.
USA - Colombia / Panama (2024)	Trilateral Cooperation: Humanitarian and security aid in exchange for containing flows in the Darién Gap.	Development funding, technical assistance for the Border Patrol and US diplomatic favor.	Asymmetric Burden-Sharing: Transit states (Global South) absorb social/humanitarian costs, while the U.S. (North) protects borders remotely.	The aid does not compensate for the real pressures on the transit territories. The flows do not stop, but become more dangerous.
Italy - Albania (2023-2024)	Bilateral Protocol: Creation of repatriation and asylum centres under Italian jurisdiction in Albanian territory.	Infrastructure investments (cost for Italy almost €1 billion), support for entry into the EU, unblocking of the pension agreement.	Political Commodity: Asylum becomes a tradable good. Albania acts as a “buffer state” to gain status; Italy outsources procedures and political costs.	High costs for negligible numbers (low functionality). Legal doubts (EU Court of Justice/Supreme Court) and risk of erosion of the right to asylum.

SOURCE: *Asylum as Geopolitical Currency: Rents and Incentives in Contemporary Migration Governance* (Ricci 2025)

4. Typologies and Trajectories of Refugee Rentierism

The comparative cases discussed above show that refugee rentierism is neither uniform nor monolithic (see Table 1). It operates instead as a flexible political-economic strategy. States deploy it according to their geopolitical position, domestic priorities and leverage in international negotiations. Across different regional contexts, refugee rentierism tends to crystallize around three broad patterns – economic, political and symbolic – although these often overlap and produce hybrid configurations. Such hybridity reveals the many ways in which states instrumentalize displaced populations.

Economic rentierism appears most clearly in countries where the presence of refugees can be converted into direct financial flows. Fragile economies such as Lebanon, Jordan, and more recently Tunisia and Mauritania, have learned to monetize refugee hosting. They do so by linking it to external aid, development financing and macroeconomic support [4]. What begins as humanitarian assistance gradually becomes a form of geopolitical remuneration. Donor states and international organizations, especially within the European Union, increasingly tie development support to expectations of border control and containment. As a result, refugee management becomes embedded in a wider migration-development-security nexus [22]. Asylum is no longer anchored solely in universal legal obligations but becomes entangled in conditional incentives shaped by the strategic interests of donors and recipients.

Political rents follow a similar logic. In some contexts, governments use their role as hosts or gatekeepers to extract diplomatic concessions, reinforce regime stability or boost their regional and international influence. Turkey’s relationship with the European Union after 2016 is a clear example. By containing millions of Syrian refugees, Ankara secured not only substantial financial transfers but also renewed strategic relevance in European diplomacy. This leverage strengthened its position in discussions on accession and visa liberalization [25]. Comparable patterns appear in Egypt and Morocco,

where migration control has become a bargaining tool for obtaining political recognition or military and development cooperation [13]. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes, refugee rentierism can also function as a strategy for consolidating domestic authority. External partners eager to outsource migration control may overlook governance failures or human-rights violations. In doing so, they help embattled governments stabilize their hold on power. Refugee management thus becomes both an external negotiation and an internal instrument of regime survival [21].

A third trajectory – symbolic or performative rentierism – concerns cases where asylum policies generate political value even without producing tangible results. The United Kingdom’s partnership with Rwanda illustrates this dynamic. Although the plan had not relocated a single asylum seeker as of 2024, it served as a potent political symbol. It allowed the UK government to project resolve on irregular migration and to reinforce a narrative of strong borders and sovereign control. Australia’s offshore processing system operates similarly. Despite its high costs and international controversy, it continues to deliver political gains by sustaining a narrative of uncompromising deterrence. In such cases, the value of refugee management lies less in operational effectiveness and more in the domestic performance of order, security and authority. These symbolic rewards often overshadow humanitarian or legal concerns, strengthening a politics of spectacle rather than a politics of protection [38].

Although the economic, political and symbolic dimensions provide a helpful analytical vocabulary, they rarely appear in isolation. In practice, states combine several forms of rent extraction at once. Turkey blends financial revenues with enhanced diplomatic leverage while also cultivating a domestic narrative of national strength. Lebanon and Jordan use refugee hosting to stabilize their economies and to secure political insulation. Italy’s agreement with Albania mixes intra-EU political signaling with domestic performances of border control and indirect economic incentives. Refugee rentierism thus functions as a modular strategy. States activate different forms of rent according to the expectations of specific audiences – donor governments, international organizations or domestic constituencies – and the constraints of their political moment [13].

Taken together, these dynamics reveal how refugee rentierism is reshaping the global protection landscape. As financial incentives, geopolitical bargains and symbolic performances increasingly determine the distribution of responsibilities, the asylum regime drifts further away from its rights-based foundations. Relief becomes tied to a state’s bargaining power rather than to the needs of displaced people. Border violence and deterrence are outsourced to third countries. The burden of protection shifts toward states with fewer resources and weaker institutions [19,23]. In this emerging order, displaced populations are treated less as rights-holders and more as tradable assets in a competitive geopolitical marketplace.

Refugee rentierism therefore points to more than a set of policy trends. It signals the rise of a new political economy of asylum – one governed by incentives, negotiations and strategic transactions rather than by universal principles of protection. This shift carries profound implications for refugees and for the integrity and future of the international refugee regime.

5. Critiques and Consequences: Toward a New Political Economy of Asylum

The rise of refugee rentierism marks a profound turning point in the governance of forced displacement, bringing into sharp relief the widening gap between the universalist principles enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the increasingly transactional practices shaping contemporary asylum policy. As states transform refugee protection into a site of negotiation – exchanging containment for financial transfers, diplomatic recognition or political capital – the normative foundations of the refugee regime begin to erode. This shift has generated significant scholarly concern, not only for its immediate humanitarian repercussions but for the structural transformation it signals within the global system of protection.

One of the most pressing critiques concerns the redistribution of responsibility, which is no longer guided by legal obligation or moral duty but by geopolitical bargaining power. Responsibility for hosting refugees is increasingly devolved to states in the Global South – many of them economically fragile or politically unstable – while wealthier states insulate themselves from claims to asylum through externalization agreements [9,10]. The consequence is what scholars have termed a “reverse geography of protection”: the burden shifts away from those best equipped to shoulder it toward those least able to

do so. This pattern entrenches global inequalities, creating a system in which access to protection is determined less by individual need and more by the outcomes of interstate negotiations.

A second concern relates to the erosion of human rights norms. As externalization increasingly becomes the default mode of migration governance, states delegate the coercive dimensions of asylum control to third countries, often with limited oversight. Reports from Libya, Nauru, Manus Island and, more recently, Tunisia and Lebanon document widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, forced returns and violence against migrants. Yet these practices occur at a distance from donor states, allowing them to maintain an appearance of compliance with humanitarian standards while benefiting from a system of “outsourced deterrence” [7]. Didier Fassin has described this dynamic as humanitarian reason: a discourse that legitimizes exclusion by cloaking it in the language of protection and responsibility, even as the material conditions for refugees deteriorate [6]. In this configuration, violence becomes both commodified and concealed, enabling donor states to evade accountability for the harms inflicted in their name.

A third critique concerns the instrumentalization of refugees in both domestic and international politics. Externally, states such as Turkey, Morocco and Egypt use the threat of releasing refugee flows to pressure donor states, thereby transforming displaced populations into leverage within the international system [13,21]. Internally, governments deploy refugees as symbols in national political debates, staging policies of deterrence and enforcement to project strength, restore perceptions of sovereignty or redirect public discontent. In the United Kingdom and Australia, for example, asylum policies often serve more as political spectacle than as functional tools of migration management. This dual instrumentalization – outward and inward – produces what might be called a double rent: refugees become simultaneously sources of international bargaining power and domestic political utility.

Compounding these challenges is the normalization of emergency governance in asylum policy. Techniques initially introduced as exceptional responses to crises – offshore processing, mandatory detention, interdiction at sea – gradually become institutionalized as permanent features of border regimes. As Agier [39] argues, the “humanitarian camp” becomes a stable spatial technology of control, reflecting a broader trend toward the codification of exception as rule. Under such conditions, asylum shifts from a juridical right to an administratively rationed privilege, allocated according to criteria of political expediency rather than protection.

These developments have profound implications for the multilateral refugee regime. Increasingly, bilateral agreements and ad hoc partnerships bypass the authority of organizations such as the UNHCR, fragmenting the governance system and undermining the universality of protection norms [4]. As states prioritize their strategic interests and negotiate individualized deals, the coherence and legitimacy of the international protection framework weaken. Refugee rentierism thus contributes to what some scholars describe as the delegitimization of asylum: a drift away from rights-based commitments toward marketized arrangements governed by incentives, penalties and financial flows [23].

Taken together, these trends point toward the emergence of a new political economy of asylum, characterized by three defining features. First, protection is increasingly monetized, converted into a service that can be purchased or outsourced. Second, geopolitical asymmetry becomes a structural determinant of refugee governance, empowering certain states to leverage their location while marginalizing the normative authority of international law. Third, solidarity – once envisioned as a foundational principle of the refugee regime – becomes depoliticized, reframed as a negotiable good rather than a moral or legal imperative.

This new configuration represents more than an incremental policy change; it signals a fundamental reordering of the values and practices that underpin international protection. What is at stake is not merely the treatment of refugees but the viability of the post-war humanitarian consensus. As refugee rentierism continues to expand, it challenges the very meaning of asylum, shifting it from the realm of inalienable rights to that of transactional governance, where the displaced become commodities in the strategic calculus of states.

6. Beyond Rentierism, Toward Global Justice

These arrangements must also be understood within broader shifts in international public finance. Deals such as the EU-Turkey Statement are not isolated transfers but manifestations of a deeper

reconfiguration of the global aid architecture, in which migration control increasingly shapes allocation criteria, financial modalities and institutional priorities. This evolution signals a structural move away from traditional needs-based assistance and toward a politically conditioned model of resource distribution.

A first trend concerns the growing reliance on extra-budgetary instruments – trust funds, macro-financial assistance facilities and blended-finance mechanisms – that obscure the conventional boundaries between humanitarian aid, development cooperation and security expenditure. These instruments allow donors to mobilize large financial packages rapidly and flexibly, often outside standard bureaucratic and parliamentary oversight. Their design also permits the bundling of development, stabilization and migration-control objectives within a single financial pipeline, thereby normalizing the integration of border governance into development planning.

A second trend lies in the securitization of development budgets. As migration becomes framed as a risk to national and regional stability, donor states increasingly redirect resources toward border infrastructure, surveillance technologies and enforcement capacity in partner countries. This reorientation diverts funds away from long-term poverty reduction or institution-building, channeling them instead into projects that explicitly advance deterrence and containment agendas. What were once development tools are thus repurposed to manage mobility, reinforcing the logic of externalized border governance.

A third trend involves the expansion of conditional financing. Access to development resources or macro-economic support is increasingly tied to a state's willingness to act as a buffer against onward mobility. Governments are incentivized to adopt restrictive migration practices in exchange for funding, policy concessions or reputational gain in international forums. These conditionalities formalize refugee rentierism within global financial governance: the capacity to contain displaced populations becomes a criterion for financial eligibility, not merely a diplomatic bargaining tool.

These dynamics demonstrate that refugee rentierism is embedded within evolving patterns of global financial governance. Macroeconomic instruments – traditionally designed to support economic stabilization or development trajectories – are now mobilized to shape and regulate human mobility. In this sense, refugee management becomes a financialized domain, governed through incentives, conditionalities and performance-based disbursements that mirror broader trends in contemporary development finance.

Concrete examples highlight the institutionalization of these trends. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and the Facility for Refugees in Turkey together channelled several billion euros through modalities typically associated with development finance. In doing so, they embedded migration control within the long-term financial strategies of the European Union, making containment a core priority of its external financial planning. These instruments funded border management, livelihood programs, stabilization efforts and surveillance infrastructures, illustrating how refugee rentierism becomes operationalized through multi-sectoral budget lines.

Similarly, the International Monetary Fund's recent engagements in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia have incorporated migration governance into macro-economic reform dialogue. While not migration-specific institutions, IMF missions and staff reports increasingly address the fiscal pressures associated with refugee hosting and the political expectations of donor governments regarding border management. This linkage reinforces a growing trend: fiscal stabilization packages and structural reforms are negotiated within a geopolitical environment where migration control has become a metric of international cooperation.

Together, these developments reveal that refugee rentierism cannot be examined solely through the lens of bilateral politics or migration governance. It is inseparable from a broader transformation in global financial regimes, in which economic instruments, development resources and stabilization funds are progressively aligned with the strategic objective of regulating mobility. This convergence marks a fundamental shift in the political economy of protection and raises critical questions about the future of rights-based asylum systems.

7. Conclusions

The analysis developed in this article shows that refugee rentierism is not simply a policy trend or an episodic response to contemporary migration pressures. It represents a deeper, structural transformation in the governance of forced displacement. By tracing its theoretical roots, mapping its empirical forms and examining its political and normative effects, it becomes clear that refugee rentierism reflects a profound realignment of the global protection system. What is at stake is not only how displaced people are treated, but the meaning of asylum itself as a political, legal and ethical institution.

The most significant consequence of this transformation is the shift from a universal, rights-based regime to a transactional and incentive-driven one. States increasingly negotiate financial transfers, diplomatic concessions or symbolic political gains in exchange for containing displaced populations. As a result, protection becomes detached from its humanitarian and legal foundations. The right to seek asylum – conceived after the Second World War as an inalienable safeguard – slowly loses its normative grounding. It becomes a contingent benefit, allocated through bilateral deals, geopolitical bargaining and deterrence strategies. This reconfiguration weakens both the moral coherence and the legal integrity of the international refugee regime.

These dynamics are reinforced by broader transformations in international public finance. As shown in the previous section, donors now rely heavily on extra-budgetary instruments, securitized development funds and conditional financing schemes. This financial architecture embeds migration control within macro-economic governance and development planning. It also turns refugee management into a criterion for financial eligibility. When development resources, budget support or stabilization funds hinge on a state's willingness to act as a buffer against onward mobility, the transactional logic of rentierism becomes institutionalized at the global level. Asylum is reshaped not only by political bargaining but by shifts in international financial modalities.

Refugee rentierism also reshapes global patterns of responsibility. It entrenches asymmetries between North and South, producing a system in which states with limited resources shoulder disproportionate humanitarian burdens, while wealthier states shield themselves from displacement pressures. This “reverse geography of protection” does not merely mirror existing power imbalances; it reproduces them. For some governments, refugee rents become tools of regime consolidation or instruments of coercive diplomacy. For others, they generate symbolic value: performances of sovereignty, control or deterrence aimed primarily at domestic audiences, regardless of policy effectiveness.

These developments contribute to the fragmentation of the multilateral protection regime. As bilateral agreements and ad hoc financial arrangements proliferate, institutions such as UNHCR lose authority. The universal aspirations of the 1951 Convention are overshadowed by a patchwork of transactional mechanisms shaped by financial incentives and power differentials. In such an order, protection is governed less by shared principles than by competitive bargaining. Refugees are treated less as rights-holders and more as geopolitical assets (valuable only insofar as they can be contained, monitored or exchanged).

Acknowledging this transformation, however, also creates space for alternative imaginaries. If refugee rentierism reveals the vulnerabilities of the current system, it also highlights the need for new forms of responsibility-sharing and new models of financing. Strengthening global protection requires moving beyond transactional arrangements and reasserting the normative commitments that underpin international refugee law. It demands a reinvigorated role for multilateral institutions, the creation of equitable and binding mechanisms for distributing responsibilities and a renewed resistance to unilateral deterrence policies. It also requires confronting the structural drivers of displacement – conflict, inequality, climate change – rather than outsourcing them to the geopolitical periphery.

The challenge is not only institutional but profoundly political. Reversing the drift toward a rentier model of protection means restoring asylum as a cornerstone of international human rights. It requires affirming protection as a collective commitment rather than a commodity. In this sense, critiquing refugee rentierism is inseparable from the broader pursuit of global justice: a pursuit that seeks to transcend narrow state interests and to rebuild the universalist ethos that shaped the post-war refugee regime.

Ultimately, refugee rentierism should be read not just as a phenomenon to document but as a warning. The more the international community allows protection to be traded on the geopolitical and financial marketplace, the further it moves from the original promise of asylum. The future of the refugee regime depends on whether states choose to deepen this transactional logic or to reassert the primacy of rights, solidarity and shared responsibility. The stakes are exceptionally high: at issue is the credibility of the global human rights system and the dignity of those forced to flee.

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