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Remapping the Holy Land from the margins

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How a Jordanian Evangelical church juggles the 'local' and the 'global' in the Syrian refugee response

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Abstract: Mafraq, a Jordanian border town, has been profoundly reshaped by the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011. As aid agencies were initially absent from the humanitarian response, the gap was filled by faith-based organisations. In an academic and policy environment narrowly focused on security issues, Islamic charities have received considerable attention. However, little is known about the activities of Evangelical groups, let alone Arab Evangelicals, and how giving aid becomes embedded in wider religiopolitical projects.

This article explores how the Mafraq Unity Church, an indigenous Evangelical congregation, balances its religious identity with an increasingly professionalized NGO "business". Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2016/17, I argue that through tapping into resources from secular and non-secular transnational networks, the church appeals to two "international communities": the aid industries and Evangelical communities worldwide. The church's rootedness in northern Jordan speaks to the humanitarian sector's recent "localization of aid" agenda, while its benevolent activities are also framed as part of worldwide Evangelism. This allows Jordanian church officials to rhetorically shift Evangelism's centre of gravity to the Global South and move Mafraq closer to the demographic and historical centre of Christianity.

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Mafraq, a provincial town in northern Jordan, is home to ca. 100,000 locals and similar numbers of Syrians, making it one of the urban areas most affected by the sudden influx of refugees in the Middle East (UNHCR 2018). Mafraq's refugee population is almost exclusively Muslim. 2000 to 3000 locals, only a tiny fraction of the town's inhabitants, are Christians, dispersed across different churches[1] - one of them is the Mafraq Unity Church.[2] An offshoot of an American Evangelical denomination that originated in the 19th century, today's congregation is composed of only 120 locals and foreigners. And yet, its brand-new seat is one of the tallest buildings on Mafraq's high street, its tower adorned by a man-sized cross that looms over the roofs. On the street level, the entrance to the church is easily recognizable by groups of fully veiled Syrian women who wait by the door. For the benefit of foreign donors, the modern building's construction process was accompanied by frequent updates on the church's Facebook page – in English.

The church's new visibility has to be understood in the context of its pioneering role in the local humanitarian response since 2011. To give an idea of the dimension of its engagement with Syrians, by the end of 2016, according to the pastor's estimates, the church had assisted almost 50% of the refugees in town – ca. 42,000 people. Especially in the early days of Syrian displacement, it was the first aid provider for many. In return, the arrival of refugees turned out to be a catalyst for the influx of new practices, ideologies, people and resources.

Faith and aid have long gone hand-in-hand. "Developing" the Middle East through building hospitals and schools has long accompanied missionary endeavours. They became even more prominent after Arab states had gradually gained independence after the First World War and begun to control proselytizing activities on their territory more tightly (Murre-Van den Berg 2006). Conversely, today's secular aid industry is historically rooted in Christian charity and philanthropy (Redfield & Bornstein 2010). More recently, the Syrian refugee crisis has sparked new interest in faith-based humanitarian responses to displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a, Ferris 2011, Ager and Ager 2015). In Mafraq, the church worked alongside – and sometimes in cooperation with - international Christian NGOs like Caritas and World Vision, grassroots Evangelical NGOs, independent missionaries and even Islamic charities. This illustrates the great diversity of faith-based actors with regard to scale, histories, funding and degrees of adherence to humanitarian neutrality and impartiality (Ferris 2011). What all of these have in common is their embeddedness in transnational support networks (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b) and access to shared spiritual identities, alternative sources of funding and a large pool of – often unpaid – volunteers (El Nakib and Ager 2015).

In the Levantine context, Hamas' electoral successes in Palestine in the mid-2000s triggered new research on Islamic and Christian charities (Challand 2008). Ruiz de Elvira's (2012) ethnography of Terre des Hommes Syria illustrates the hybrid nature of many faith-based organisations. Originally established in Damascus in the 1960s by a Catholic priest, Terre des Hommes Syria rebranded itself as a development actor with an interfaith agenda and partnerships with major UN agencies. In the Jordanian context, Ababsa's 2014 report on Islamic charities during the Syrian refugee crisis draws attention to alternative agendas

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[1] With an estimated population of ca. 140,000, Christians make up only 2.2% of the predominantly Muslim country. Almost two thirds of them are Greek Orthodox; only 20,000 Jordanians are Protestant Christians (Pew Research Center 2011). However, Christians' rights and freedom of religion are safeguarded in Jordan's constitution and electoral system (Maggiolini 2015).

[2] To protect my informants, the name of the church and all individuals have been changed.

outside the human rights framework and Gulf states' funding. But we know little about the humanitarian role of *indigenous* Christian organizations like Mafraq's Unity Church and how giving aid is embedded in wider religiopolitical projects.

This article builds on existing research on the role of *transnational* networks in faith-based humanitarianism. Following Faist (2010: 1672), I understand the "transnational" not as a coherent theory, but as a research "perspective" that foregrounds *social* processes of border-crossing and privileges a bottom-up and multi-scalar approach to studying human mobility. The key contribution of this article is twofold: First, it disentangles the transnational connections that intersect in the Mafraq Unity Church and keep its humanitarian activities going. The Unity Church strategically appeals to secular and Evangelical "international communities", balancing acts of self-representation towards geographically, politically and otherwise disparate partners. Engaging partners with dissimilar agendas does not proceed without friction. The article therefore highlights discrepancies in the ways the church communicates with various audiences.

Second, I discuss the church's negotiation of its own "marginality". In the 1970s, World Systems Theory subdivided the globe into dominant core countries and underdeveloped peripheries and semi-peripheries (Wallerstein 2004), an understanding of the margins in terms of deprivation and exploitative labour that lingers on until today. More recently, anthropologists have suggested detaching "remoteness" from peripheral territories; instead, they investigate the social, economic and cultural processes that *produce* remote places (Andersson and Saxer 2016). From remote regions' disconnectedness, this scholarship has shifted the focus to the flows of people, goods and ideas that criss-cross them.

Geographically speaking, Mafraq, a mere fifteen miles away from the Syrian border, is certainly peripheral. High rates of youth unemployment, the lack of major industries and the thick local Bedouin accent add to its reputation as a rough outpost on the edge of the steppe. At times, church officials also make *strategic* use of the centre-periphery narrative, especially when communicating with potential donors. However, a binary understanding of Mafraq's position as a backwater at the margins of Jordanian territory, the international humanitarian system and the Christian world does not adequately describe how church members appropriate their "localness" in interactions with mainstream development funders and within a global vision of Evangelical Christianity.

The first section of the article addresses how after 2011, the church took the lead in the refugee response in Mafraq, tapping into a specific form of transnational discourse, networks and sources of funding: namely, mainstream development action. Alongside its transnationalisation, Unity Church remained deeply embedded in the local social fabric, both as an employer to fellow tribesmen and through showcasing cultural sensitivity towards Syrian refugees. In the second part of the article, I attend to how being "local" becomes part of the church's humanitarian marketing strategy. Finally, I move to another scale to show how the church simultaneously appeals to transnational Evangelical communities. Church officials relied on different *economic* and *spiritual* geographies of faith. While the church received financial support and volunteers mostly from Europe and North America, it turned to the Global South[3] and, more specifically, to the Arab world, for *spiritual* matters. This allowed the pastor to rhetorically recentre Christianity southwards and expand the notion of the Holy

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[3] I use the terms "Global North" and "South" in a heuristic way for referring to unequal patterns of wealth in the world. From a postcolonial perspective, this terminology has been criticized for perpetuating relationships of domination and downplaying the fluidity of roles of people in the "South" (e.g. Power 2003, McEwan 2009).

Land, so that it comes to encompass Mafraq. In the last section, I revisit tensions between the church's heartfelt acts of Christian compassion and antagonistic attitudes towards Syrians, highlighting its complex understandings of refugees' "needs" and the temporality of the humanitarian response. But first, I will situate my findings at a specific moment of the Syrian refugee response in Jordan and discuss my own relationship with the church.

Insider/ outsider at the Unity Church

My study draws on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2016/17 in Mafraq, where Syrian refugees started arriving en masse during the siege of Homs in early 2012. In 2018, UNHCR statistics counted ca. 84,000 Syrians (UNHCR, June 2018), although the Mayor of Mafraq had provided me with estimates closer to 100,000 at the time of my fieldwork.

In 2014, new governmental regulations restricted Syrians' freedom of movement across the border and in urban areas (Achilli 2015). Since an ISIS attack in mid-2016, the Jordanian-Syrian border has remained permanently closed, despite a recent southward flux of refugees when the Assad regime attacked remaining rebel enclaves in southern Syria in summer 2018 (Specia 2018). The church caters to Syrians who mostly arrived between 2012 and 2014. This group comprises poor peasants from the Homs and Aleppo governorates, who had intermittently worked in Mafraq as seasonal migrants before the war, reminiscent of decades of Syrian seasonal migration to Lebanon (Chalcraft 2009). While the number of Syrians in town has remained relatively stable for years, the dwindling of humanitarian resources – e.g. cuts to the World Food Programme's voucher system in mid-2015 - has particularly affected refugees in urban areas like Mafraq (Bellamy, Haysom, Wake and Barbelet 2017). This has heightened the relevance of grassroots and faith-based organizations to their survival. It is in this context that I got to engage with the Unity Church.

I first visited the church during Ramadan 2015; I had received the contact details of Pastor Aissa from a student-led NGO in Edinburgh and had been invited to stay for two days. I was immediately taken by the pastor's demure smile, his comprehensive view of the refugee situation and his command of English.[4] Before Pastor Aissa got involved in the church, he had initially trained as an engineer. His professional background seemed to inform his pragmatic approach to running a church, but also giving aid – the pastor was always ready to discuss the practicalities of hiring Syrian tilers, and his Facebook stream included numerous pictures of him on the construction site of the new church building. Far from being an ascetic theologian, Pastor Aissa was a hands-on manager. During Sunday service, I would soon get to know him as a passionate preacher as well. With dark circles under his eyes, Pastor Aissa looked forever tired. While we were speaking, his teenage children and other church members kept popping in. The busy scene gave the impression of an honest family man, sacrificing his private life and health for assisting Syrians. I soon realized that much of the church's success with various partners relied on his charismatic persona.

Given the church's embeddedness in Mafraq's social fabric and the humanitarian response, it seemed reasonable to apply for a stay as a long-term volunteer for the sake of my doctoral research. Upon my return to the UK, I stayed in touch with the American volunteer in charge of coordinating foreign visitors. He asked me to provide a "profession of faith" to the church. In November 2015, I sent a lengthy email in which I laid out my religious upbringing, my father's employment in a Protestant hospital and previous volunteering experiences. However, the church rejected my application on vague terms – apparently, I had failed to match its

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[4] All of the pastor's and head of school's quotes were originally in English; language mistakes are their own.

Evangelical convictions. As a consequence, I began to live with a local Muslim host family when I started my fieldwork in January 2016. I also volunteered with a European grassroots organization that only at second sight turned out to be Evangelical and often collaborated with the church.

As a consolation, the pastor invited me to attend service on Sundays. During my research, I struck an informal arrangement with Yusuf, a local member of the church in charge of aid delivery. Yusuf was so well-known among Syrians in town that they often referred to the church as "Yusuf's church" or simply "Yusuf". Since I met many Syrians through my volunteering activities, Yusuf occasionally accepted demands for food parcels that I transmitted. On one occasion, the pastor himself unbureaucratically provided financial support for hearing aids for a Syrian boy who I had encountered through the NGO. In 2016, I arranged another four formal meetings with the pastor. On three of these occasions, I was accompanied by European academics who had come to Mafraq for informal scoping trips, and interviews were conducted jointly.

I thus interacted with the pastor, Yusuf and other members of the church in my various capacities: as a research student, as an NGO volunteer and as a member of their parish. Although I always emphasized that I was collecting data for my doctoral thesis, boundaries were often blurred, especially during informal chats after Sunday service. I knew the church as an insider and an outsider. My position at the intersection of academic research, faith-based and secular humanitarianism mimics the overlapping networks that the church so aptly navigates, an issue which I will discuss more in detail below. The final point I make here is that communication was not a one-way street for the benefit of my PhD research. Church officials had a vested interest in showcasing their humanitarian achievements, as integrating (presumably Christian) foreigners into the church was central to their globalized outreach strategy to audiences and potential funders in the Global North.

A church or an NGO?

In every interview, Pastor Aissa was quick to point out that despite its manifold humanitarian activities, the church had retained its religious character: "First, we are a church, not an NGO!" In a similar vein, the head of the church's informal school for Syrian children insisted: "All teachers in the school have ministry. This is ministry, not work". However, the pastor's office, where he received his interview partners, conveyed a different message. One wall was dominated by a huge whiteboard with the visiting schedule of the church's various short-term volunteers and international partners. With a sweeping gesture, the pastor invited visitors to check his bookkeeping and his workplace: "Everything we receive, we share it… My computer is always open, even my email."

We might not expect accounting and human resources management to be among a church's priorities. However, Pastor Aissa and fellow church officials quickly learned the codes of mainstream development action when Syrian refugees started arriving in 2011. Because of Mafraq's location in the vicinity of a refugee hot spot, it was initially overlooked by more mainstream aid organizations. When nearby Zaatari camp was established in June 2012, it received the bulk of international attention and funding. Although many camp inmates subsequently settled in Mafraq, the local UNHCR sub-office only opened in August 2014. In turn, the initial gap in humanitarian service provision encouraged the mushrooming of local and foreign faith-based charities and small NGOs, often operating on limited budgets and unpaid staff (Dickinson 2014). This resulted in a multi-layered humanitarian landscape like in post-tsunami Sri Lanka (Stirrat 2006) and, more recently, Greece (Papataxiarchis 2016).

Smaller aid providers such as the Unity Church also benefitted from Jordan's lenient policy environment: Western volunteers often entered the country on a tourist visa.

The Unity Church began to provide emergency aid, and, later, services complementary to those of the UNHCR, the leading organisation in the refugee response in Jordan. The UNHCR provides humanitarian documentation to all Syrian refugees and cash assistance to the selected few. It also coordinates resettlement abroad and offers additional forms of protection. The Unity Church, by contrast, has established a wide portfolio of short- and more long-term services to refugees. As the pastor expertly put it: "We do relief *and* development".

During our interviews, he recited these programmes almost mechanically. In the presence of European researchers, our conversations often took the shape of a marketing event. In 2016, the church provided monthly food parcels to between 400 and 500 Syrian families. It also gave out so-called "welcome kits", composed of basic furniture and cooking utensils, to 6,000 Syrian households, as well as 3,000 "winterization kits" with heaters and blankets. Many refugees received financial support for medical treatment, including eyeglasses; the church also offered trauma and speech therapy. It ran an informal school for 160 Syrian children. In addition, the new church building on Mafraq's high street hosted a community centre where English, sewing and handicraft were taught to mixed and women-only classes. The variety of educational programmes and medical services speaks to the diversity, and high degree of professional qualification of church members and volunteers.

The church did not only "do" development, its officials also "spoke" development jargon. During the interviews, the pastor liked to impress with statistics, for example, the average size of Syrian families in town, and describe certain types of refugees – Syrian women and children – as innocent victims of the conflict. That the church's educational programmes predominantly targeted these demographics is not a coincidence. Rather, it reflects wider trends in the development sector that paint them as ideal aid beneficiaries (e.g. Malkki 2015, Olivius 2014). As critics have pointed out, depoliticized representations that focus on suffering and lack of agency obscure the root causes of displacement. Although the pastor was highly knowledgeable about regional history and enjoyed teaching me about it, he never touched upon the origins of the Syrian civil war, neither in our interviews nor during Sunday service.

With all these activities, the church had gradually turned itself into a humanitarian hub. It cooperated with established aid providers and cultural institutions such as the British Council, and the pastor was eager to host coordination meetings with NGOs. For example, I once organised a roundtable with *Doctors without Borders*. It was attended by the pastor, American volunteer, Yusuf, as well as various Christian doctors and nurses. The aim of the meeting was to inform local healthcare providers about *Doctors without Borders*' preterm birth clinic and child trauma therapy in nearby Irbid and encourage them to refer Syrian patients to these services.

Finally, the church attracted major funding from mainstream aid organisations all over the globe, including Mercy Corps and a secular Malaysian NGO. Proudly, the pastor recounted his meeting with the Hungarian ambassador in Amman who had promised the church 10,000€: "The ambassador himself came. He told me, 'the reason I come is because you have good reputation'."

The gradual professionalization of the church's programmes of assistance mimics the trajectory of other religious institutions in Jordan. Corroborative evidence comes from Irbid

where El Nakib and Ager (2015) mapped local Christian and Islamic communities and their involvement in the refugee response. Like in Mafraq, local churches in Irbid initially opened up community spaces to refugees and benefitted from their parishioners' religious motivations and readiness to volunteer. Over time, they established partnerships with various international organizations and began to speak and follow a secular development "script" (El Nakib and Ager 2015, p. 24). Some of the main pitfalls El Nakib and Ager's study found included a lack of neutrality and technical expertise, and a clash with international donors' human rights-based approach. As we saw, Mafraq's Unity Church pre-emptively addressed some of these concerns by emphasizing its high degree of accountability and adopting development jargon. This becomes especially clear if we look at the church's humanitarian marketing strategy, centred around its "localness".

Appropriating the "local"

In the past, humanitarian responses to conflict and natural disasters were planned and funded in the Global North, although most crises occurred elsewhere. However, over the last three decades, major donors and aid organisations have begun to acknowledge that local communities and institutions are often the first to provide assistance and should have a say in how it is organised. By the early 1990s, participatory approaches had become standard tools of the development industry. Critics have pointed out that participatory action risks covering up and reinforcing existing power hierarchies *within* receiving communities, e.g. with regard to gender and class (for a summary of these criticisms, see Cooke & Kothari 2001). That a community organisation like Mafraq's Unity Church could establish partnerships with mainstream NGOs and attract substantial funding thus reflects longstanding trends in the development sector's approach to aid. It also echoes more recent developments, including austerity measures and funding cuts in the 2000s (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018) and the outsourcing of humanitarian action to local NGOs in war-torn areas (Andersson 2016). Devolving responsibility and resources to indigenous aid providers makes up the UN's 'localization of aid' agenda and comes with recognition of the diversity of local helpers. On the level of policy-making, the international community's commitment to localizing aid has also been enshrined in schemes that give special attention to community faith leaders, e.g. the UNHCR's 2012 'High Commissioner's Dialogue on Faith and Protection', its related 'Welcoming the Stranger' initiative with key faith leaders, and the 2016 'Grand Bargain', committing the world's biggest donors and aid organization to allocate one quarter of global humanitarian funding to local and national aid providers by 2020 (Carpi 2018, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018).

The church's popularity among Syrian refugees in Mafraq speaks to its rootedness in the community and the town. When asked to name the aid agencies most relevant to them, most Syrians would mention UNHCR and the Unity Church in one breath. Testifying to the church's relationship of trust with the refugee community, Yusuf was frequently asked to intervene in their marital feuds, and Syrians treated him like a respected community elder.

To be clear, much of the church's success came from its notable accessibility. While the UNHCR office was located on the outskirts of town and behind high walls, the Unity Church could be found at the heart of Mafraq's most vibrant shopping street. In contrast to the practice of international UNHCR members to commute from Amman on a daily basis, church officials and many volunteers were permanently based in town. Seeking proximity to Mafraq's refugees was also enacted in other ways. Twice a week, Syrian women sat on wooden benches in the nave of the church, waiting for Yusuf to call up their names and register their needs. While waiting in the queue is a common experience for the displaced

(Mountz 2011), it was made more bearable by allowing the women to wait inside as volunteers who served them tea played with their children in the church's common room.

Equally important were the house visits that church members and volunteers paid to refugee families. Every month, they entered between 500 and 700 Syrian households to deliver food parcels and furniture. These visits were framed as a more culturally sensitive way of handing over humanitarian goods as "presents". They encountered Syrians not as refugees, but as respected hosts inside their own homes. As Aissa said, "it is our culture to visit somebody" – these encounters thus activated shared and cherished codes of hospitality (Wagner Forthc.). As the pastor emphasized: "Many speak *about* the Syrians, few speak *with* them – we know them one by one."

Church officials also turned "localness" into a selling point to development organizations and donors: it was presented as more sustainable and cost-efficient. The pastor claimed: "Without the locals, relief would be wasted." He presented humanitarian assistance in the Middle East as preferable to refugees' onward flight to Europe. "We are a small country. But having one million Syrians [in Jordan] is better than in Germany. They cost less." Judging from the pastor's words, he was well aware of the international community's 'localization of aid' agenda. But he also used his knowledge of increasingly hostile asylum policies in Europe to his advantage, suggesting a possible trade-off with potential international donors: if the church received further funding, it would continue to care for Syrian refugees thus providing them with incentives to stay in Mafraq.[5]

At another level, insisting on the church's "localness" acquired an additional meaning in the context of kinship obligations and scarce local livelihoods. Many Jordanian church members donated their time to volunteering for refugees and hosting foreign visitors. But to locals, the church was also a provider. In a country where almost every fifth university graduate is unemployed (Middle East Monitor 2016), it created employment for fifteen to twenty Jordanian parishioners, often members of the pastor's tribe. Many of them taught Syrian children in the church's own school or were involved in the community centre. By helping refugees, the congregation also helped itself.

In sum, although Pastor Aissa insisted that the church had retained its religious identity, its activities, management style and fundraising strategy situated it on the playing field of the "international community" of aid agencies and foreign states.

Geographies of faith

The church's humanitarian activities can hardly be understood without recourse to its specifically *Evangelical* self-concept. As its pastor, Aissa, explained to me: "we don't follow liturgy. It's an Evangelical church. We sing songs every week. We focus on preaching." To him, being Evangelical meant that every Sunday, he provided a close reading of the Bible and discussed its relevance for parishioners' everyday lives; the service was livened up by testimonies from foreign visitors and catchy Christian pop songs. By the end of 2016, the church welcomed forty long-term volunteers and short-term helpers from fellow Evangelical

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[5] In an interview with the BBC ahead of the London Donor Conference in February 2016, King Abdullah of Jordan similarly urged the international community to step up its support for Syria's neighbouring country, painting a dramatic picture of the impact of the refugee crisis and hinting at possible flows across the Mediterranean: "In the psyche of the Jordanian people I think it's gotten to a boiling point. […] Sooner or later the dam is going to burst." (BBC 2016).

congregations all over the world. On average, it received one to three teams of up to forty foreigners every week, who slept in bunk beds on the top floor of the new church. The bilingual Sunday service brought locals and foreigners together and celebrated their multicultural Evangelical community. It always began with singing in English and Arabic, followed by greetings to incoming groups: "Jordanians, Palestinians, Indians, one church!"

Hutchinson and Wolffe (2012) argue that both transnationalisation and social activism are central to the Evangelical enterprise. Rather than defining Evangelism by a fixed set of theological doctrines, they understand it as a heterogeneous style of Protestantism with a distinctively networked nature: "it is evangelicalism's genius for creating trans-communal identities which makes it effective in high-change, socially fractured settings" (Hutchinson and Wolffe 2012, p. 224). In a similar vein, Pastor Aissa explained that humanitarian action in Mafraq was not merely local, but a global affair: "What happens here is not just for Mafraq; it's the work of God for the entire world. […] We are all partners in this ministry." He was convinced that the church's links to secular *and* non-secular transnational networks made its strength: "We do more than a small NGO can do, because we partner with *everybody*."

Interestingly, the church relied on different *economic* and *spiritual* geographies of faith. On the one hand, it received financial support and volunteers mostly from Europe and North America. By the time of my fieldwork, its American mother congregation had just paid for a pick-up truck, land and a house for its new school building. A US-based Christian NGO had added a brand-new playground to this. The church also received gifts from individual believers. The pastor proudly told me the story of a 16-year old Austrian man who had collected 8,000€ by himself and travelled to Mafraq in a wheelchair. "He gave me the money here in this office. It is amazing what God can do!" The Biblical symbolism of the example did not escape me. Whereas development jargon and balance sheets might have appealed to development professionals, powerful stories like this targeted the pockets of a different audience: fellow believers from the global Evangelical community. But the latter did not only support the church from a distance; they also frequently visited Mafraq for short-term volunteering, and their activities were not always in line with conventional development action. By way of illustration, a group of Chinese believers from the Netherlands once spent three days washing the feet of Syrian refugees.

On the other hand, the pastor turned to the Global South for *spiritual* matters. He was adamant about asserting Jordanian ownership of the church and liked to tell the story of its modest origins in a mud house: the church was *materially* made of the native earth of Mafraq and by native people from the area. The Mafraq Unity Church was established in 1948 by a Syrian Arab Christian who had fled from Haifa. Its first converts were not Muslims, but local Christians from traditional denominations, mostly Greek-Orthodox, who had come to Mafraq some decades earlier from small towns in the vicinity – Husn, Ajloun and Salt - to work as engineers for the Iraqi Petroleum Company on the nearby Mossul-Haifa pipeline. The church's founders had another connection to Syria: tribesmen of the current pastor had migrated to present-day Jordan only a few generations ago from a Syrian village just across today's border.

Prior to the 1960s, the newly established congregation gathered in a traditional mud house, the likes of which have now almost entirely disappeared from Mafraq's cityscape, until they could afford a modern church. While the original ground was purchased by its mother congregation, Pastor Aissa emphasized that the church had long been run by locals: "There have been no missionaries here for the last fifty years. We are independent!" But this was not entirely true. In 1965, an American doctor had founded a sanatorium for chest diseases to

deliver medical services, as well as the gospel, to Bedouins in the area. Foreign medical staff from the sanatorium regularly attended the bilingual service on Sundays, and, as the pastor underlined, considered Unity Church "their church".

In many ways, the church's history is typical of more longstanding Christian missions in the Arab world. Since the 1990s, scholarly interest in missionaries' role in Middle Eastern history and politics has been growing. In the early 19th century, Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe and North America rediscovered the region as an area of interest, driven by a mix of worldly and spiritual ambitions, including a desire to visit and preserve the Holy Sites, eschatological expectations, and spreading Christianity. Often, they were implicated in colonial and imperialist projects of their home countries (e.g. Sharkey 2011, Van den Murre-Berg 2006).

The pastor's speech acts, I suggest, indicate *new* trends in Evangelical mission. At times, historical studies of 19th- and 20th-century missionaries have privileged their perspective over the experience of locals, as the former left a long paper trail behind them, including personal diaries and correspondence (Makdisi 2008). However, Pastor Aissa was not only telling his church's story. He was choosing to tell it in a *particular* way, emphasizing not transatlantic connections, but rather Arab networks. In subtle ways, he was shifting the centre of gravity of the globalized Evangelical endeavour away from the US, insisting on the church's longstanding linkages with Unity churches in Jerusalem, Syria and Iraq. These were backed up by kinship ties: the son of the founder of the Mafraq Unity Church had gone on to set up a Unity Church in Aleppo, and his grandson is now a pastor in Damascus.

Through his networks, the pastor also had a clear idea about where today's Christians could be found. During my fieldwork, he frequently attended Evangelical conferences abroad – quite tellingly, most of them in Asian countries like Malaysia and Thailand. Pastor Aissa's emphasis on Christianity in the Global South reflects the geographic distribution of believers today. In 1910, Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan were home to more than four times as many Christians as the rest of the world. One hundred years later, 61% of all Christians, i.e. 1.3 billion people, lived in the Global South (Pew Research Center 2011). It also resonates with wider tendencies in Evangelical mission towards the indigenization of southern churches. African and Chinese migrants, for instance, have been central to the revival and establishment of new Evangelical communities in Europe and the former Soviet Union (Hutchinson and Wolffe 2012).

The pastor's geographical vision was arguably even more specific. His aim was to recentre Christianity not only to the Global South but to Jordan in particular. In November 2016, I brought a British archaeologist to the church. Hearing about her academic background, the pastor launched into a lengthy explanation of the church's history that took us from the 20th century to the early days of Christianity. "[Jordan] was a Christian country. 100% it was Christian. In Rihab, in the west [of Mafraq], there is more than fifty churches." Naturally, only a few of these still exist. Rather, speaking to an archaeologist, the pastor was hinting at the spectacular discovery of the remains of an underground church – possibly the oldest church in the world – in 2008. His account of regional Christian history expanded the Holy Land of the Bible to the East, and beyond the Jordan River, so that it came to include Mafraq.

It is very likely that Pastor Aissa's appraisal of Mafraq's centrality to Christian heritage and territory drew inspiration from the Jordanian *national* project of branding the country as the original "Holy Land". Middle Eastern countries like Israel and Jordan have long used archaeology and religious tourism to define their national identity. In her study of two papal

visits to Jordan in 1964 and 2000, Katz (2003) argues that hosting the Pope in Amman – not Jerusalem – allowed the Hashemite monarchs to extend the notion of the Holy Land to the East Bank. However, by the Pope's second visit in 2000, his travel route had somewhat changed, as Israel's 1967 occupation of the West Bank had caused the loss of major holy places in Jerusalem and Palestine. Instead, it incorporated recently "discovered" locations of Biblical significance, including Bethany Beyond the Jordan, the presumed site of the baptism on the eastern shore of the Jordan River. Jordan, a majority-Muslim country, thus rebranded itself as the "Sunrise of Christianity". Remarkably, many Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims also cheered for the Pope in the streets. Expanding the Holy Land to the East thus sought to cement Jordan's standing in the international community in the aftermath of 9/11. Through an ecumenical state discourse, e.g. the joint Sunni-Shia Amman Message in 2004, and the foundation of inter-faith research institutions, Jordan sought to present itself as the bearer of a moderate, peaceful and tolerant Islam (Maggiolini 2015).[6] National interfaith discourse informed Pastor Aissa's choice of words when he justified opening the church doors to non-Christian refugees: "We show them respect, that they are welcome. Even though they are Muslims."

Pastor Aissa's ecumenical rhetoric goes beyond accommodating sensitivities in a Muslim-majority town or paying lip service to secular donors' agendas and Jordanian raison d'État. In the next section, I argue that taking him seriously allows us to reconsider a tension at the heart of Christian compassion, and how it plays out in the acts and attitudes of church members and volunteers towards Syrians.

Christian compassion and different temporalities of "saving" Syrians

The final part of this article deals with contradictions that arise between the church's commitment to humanitarian assistance and its missionary ambitions, between heartfelt acts of support and antagonistic attitudes towards Syrians. Faced with the mass influx of destitute refugees and the absence of conventional aid agencies, the pastor and his congregation first felt compelled to deliver aid themselves in 2011/12. At that moment, refugees' religion hardly mattered. Over time, however, church members' more *long-term* goal of converting Muslims to Evangelical Christianity became more prominent and shaped their humanitarian endeavours. This has much to do with Evangelicals' understanding of refugees' *accountability* to their benefactors, an aspect that complicated giving "with no strings attached" (Elisha 2008). Volunteers believed in the *transformative* power of human relationships: by doing good, they could put sinners on the path to redemption. Indeed, narratives of individual suffering and salvation are central to Evangelical theology. They also figured prominently in church service. Hence, Syrian aid beneficiaries were expected to accept not only material donations, but also the divine "gift", to begin a life in accordance with Biblical virtues, and to eventually convert.

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[6] That Israel might well be the blind spot on Pastor Aissa's mental map of the Holy Land is something I can only allude to in passing. Many American Evangelicals support Israel's occupation of Palestine, as the Jewish presence in the region seems to fulfil their eschatological expectations. However, this squares badly with Jordan's official endorsement for Palestinian autonomy, and the emotional involvement of Jordanian society and local members of the congregation, many of them of Palestinian origin. On a more personal level, the pastor, born in 1965 in Jericho to a (non-Palestinian) father who worked as a policeman in the local prison, had had to relocate to Mafraq after Israel's occupation of the West Bank. But when a researcher that I accompanied likened him to Syrian refugees, he corrected him quickly: "Internally displaced!" It seemed to me that mentions of Israel were outright avoided during the Sunday sermon, which was usually attended by dozens of American volunteers.

In Jordan, the law prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims (El Nakib and Ager 2015). Yet, the church was non-compliant with state doctrine in this regard. Referring to Mafraq's conservative Muslim-majority population, the head of the church-run school told me: "we need ministry in this area," in order to counteract what he considered overwhelmingly "closed [close-minded]' Muslims." In another instance, a young English-speaking volunteer spoke up during Sunday service, addressing Christian attendants: "We want Mafraq for you, we want Jordan for you [to be yours]." In this regard, church members' apprehensions of Syrians reveal a continuity with conceptions of Muslims as "the other" that shaped older missionary projects (Murre-Van den Berg 2006).

The set-up of the aid registration ceremony was charged with religious connotations. Holding the biweekly events inside the nave was perhaps practical, as it was the biggest room in the building. But its symbolic dimension was equally striking. Yusuf's desk was based on a tiny stage in front of the altar, at the same spot where Pastor Aissa spoke to the congregation on Sundays. From an elevated position, he called up one woman after the other, interrogating them about their living conditions, before making a decision about further assistance. Fully veiled Syrian women waited patiently for their turn under a cross, often for several hours, for the final word of a church member, speaking to them from above. Yusuf's verdict about aid, if not a sermon, acquired a similarly sacrosanct quality: for many Syrians in Mafraq, support from the church directly contributed to their daily survival.

Foreign volunteers engaged in covert (and sometimes less covert) attempts to convert Syrian refugees; often, proselytizing was coupled with the promise of aid or educational activities for children. In October 2016, I accompanied members of an American Christian NGO that had sponsored the school's playground to the classroom. Syrian children, all of them Muslim, were told: "I want you to paint a picture about yourself or a place where you meet God … for kids in America who are *just like you*, so they can pray for you." How exactly American children were similar to young refugees was not explicated, but the instructions that Syrian pupils received suggested that all of them believed in the same God and were part of the same religious community – a message readily accepted by an audience of primary school age, with hardly any knowledge of Islam or its distinction from other religions. On the same occasion, American volunteers performed a play about a Biblical scene with imaginative props, including wigs and costumes. Their young spectators were enchanted. Rather than using explicit Bible lessons, volunteers introduced religious content through playful activities, blurring boundaries between Islam and Christianity and encouraging young Syrians to envision themselves "just like them" – i.e. as Evangelical Christians.

In another example in August 2016, I witnessed a mesmerizing scene. During Sunday service, a young Syrian woman dressed in a black *abaya* was led to the altar. She carried her four-year old son. While passing the rows, she exchanged friendly greetings with two female Western volunteers. The pastor explained that the woman had asked him to pray for her son who regularly fainted. In front of the congregation, the pastor, another Jordanian and a South African visitor all put their hands on the child and prayed for his health. Through my NGO volunteering, I also befriended a Syrian family that frequently received American volunteers inside their home and studied the Bible with them; I even met the father of the family on Easter Sunday inside the church where he had participated in the celebrations. It is important here not to downplay Syrians' agency in navigating these missionary encounters. This particular family, for instance, never converted and seemed to play along to retain the favour of volunteers who happened to be in charge of aid delivery (cf. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b). I suggest that rather than mere opportunism, their actions indicate that they were striving to

learn and respect their Christian (and often foreign) benefactors' codes, whose assistance was a lifeline to many.

In spite of the seemingly harmonious sociality between church members and Syrian refugees, what struck me were the former's antagonistic views that underpinned their encounters with Syrians. In informal conversations, many church members revealed a veritable siege mentality, strangely at odds with the peaceful cohabitation in Mafraq's streets. For example, Yusuf frequently advised me not to walk around in Mafraq on my own, insinuating that the presence of Syrian refugees constituted danger, even when my host family considered it perfectly safe. When I told a female Jordanian church member that I was staying with a Muslim family, she was aghast, but changed her opinion abruptly upon hearing my host mother's name. Before her retirement, it turned out, she had been a secretary in the high school where my host mother had been a beloved teacher, and she remembered her fondly. Jordanian church members involved in aid delivery frequently depicted Syrians as untrustworthy, spiritually starved and estranged even from each other. Pastor Aissa, for example, deemed house visits a more culturally sensitive form of aid delivery. But he also justified them as a way of checking up on refugees' hidden belongings, arguing that aid fraud was common (Wagner Forthc.). These encounters testify to the tensions between harmoniously shared everyday lives and more abstract conceptions of difference.

Arguably, some of these negative attitudes reflect class differentials between the Syrians and the Jordanians that predate the current crisis. Poor Syrian farmers had frequently entered service with local employers in Mafraq. However, church members' anti-Muslim criticisms went beyond this history of labour migration. In 2016, the church's most visionary undertaking was to build rental units for poor Syrians and Jordanians though its "Jordan Project". During our interviews, the pastor often discussed the real estate project in *economic* terms; it was supposed to provide cheap housing, but also additional livelihoods for carpenters, blacksmiths and construction workers. However, he also presented it as an alternative to Islamic charities' housing projects. In Mafraq, the latter provided free apartments and assistance to widows and orphans, often with funding from the Gulf (cf. Ababsa 2014). In return, they restricted their beneficiaries' freedom of movement, and some Islamic charities encouraged under-age girls to get married quickly. Economic considerations aside, Pastor Aissa thus framed the church's "Jordan Project" as a remedy to the spread of Wahabi Islamic beliefs. Without proper evidence, he rhetorically discredited Islamic humanitarian organisations: "I have no proof. Sometimes it's a business; a lot of money from the Gulf came without any formal channels", suggesting that donations from wealthy private donors from the Arab Peninsula, unaccounted for by the Jordanian state and the international aid sector, fuelled Islamist activities.

Broad anti-Muslim sentiments were also expressed by foreign missionaries who relocated their families from as far away as South Korea and South Africa. In spite of their peaceful interactions with Muslims in Mafraq, some perpetuated the persecution narrative. For example, a German visitor addressed the congregation once by praising its courage: "I imagine that your life is so much harder than my life in Germany. The attacks that are coming are not against us, they are against Jesus." Which attacks he was referring to remained unclear; presumably, he was hinting at the persecution of Christians in neighbouring Iraq and Syria. Another German engineer in his early thirties, who had come to Mafraq with an evangelical organization, was taken aback when I told him that Jordanian Christians lived in harmony with their Muslim neighbours. "I thought that I might be beheaded here on the street!"

In sum, to make sense of contradictions between church members' and volunteers' inclusive actions and antagonistic discourse, it is important to keep in mind that giving aid simultaneously took place on different *temporal and spatial scales*, and that helpers framed Syrians' needs in more than one way. In the short term, the church provided for its Syrian refugees' *material* needs for food, healthcare and basic education. In this sense, humanitarian assistance in Mafraq was a localized endeavour, embedded in indigenous social fabrics and cultures. But from an Evangelical perspective, providing *material* aid necessarily remained incomplete. While it kept Muslim refugees alive in Mafraq, they were still at risk of damnation in the afterlife. Hence, in a long-term perspective, the church understood refugees' *spiritual* deprivation as a much more pressing concern, one that exceeded everyday survival and centred around their *eternal* salvation. In this sense, "saving" Syrian refugees became detached from Mafraq as a specific locality and part of spreading the gospel at a global scale. Through leading by example (and sometimes open proselytizing), Evangelical humanitarians tried to bridge the gap between the two dimensions of aid, hoping that their beneficiaries would eventually emulate them and convert.

It might well be that this is where faith-based humanitarianism most poignantly departs from "conventional", secular humanitarianism with its focus on the present, understood as a series of distinct emergencies around the globe. When the crisis is seen to end, the caravan of UN agencies and big NGOs moves on to the next catastrophe. By way of contrast, Pastor Aissa and his church seem to be in for the long run because they have a more complex understanding of the temporal depth of the "emergency". To them, the influx of refugees certainly caused a crisis in an already underserviced, marginalized area. But it was also an opportunity. By saving Syrians *now*, they also hoped to save them later – and for real.

Reshuffling the borders of Christianity

Drawing on ethnographic research with a Jordanian Evangelical church, this article corroborates research on faith-based humanitarianism that highlights the importance of religious networks through which human and monetary resources are circulated and accessed. Faith makes a difference to how (and by whom) aid is financed, organised and delivered. My case study adds another chapter to the history of American mission in the Arab world. Far from being reducible to "a [subdued] minority or […] an extension of Western Civilization" (Rowe 2010, p. 472), members of the Mafraq Unity Church show a considerable degree of agency in navigating secular and non-secular transnational connections. Within these networks, the church negotiates its marginal position.

When addressing secular donors and aid agencies, the church markets its *rootedness* in northern Jordan, tapping into the humanitarian sector's recent "localization of aid" agenda. Emphasizing its location at Europe's *periphery* adds to the church's geopolitical importance for this specific audience. Speaking to Evangelical communities worldwide, the pastor underlines the *global* importance of giving aid. In doing so, he rhetorically shifts the Evangelism's centre of gravity to the Global South and moves Mafraq closer to the geographical and historical centre of Christianity. The church's increasingly hybrid nature – somewhere between an NGO and a religious institution – also underlies tensions between inclusive acts of Christian compassion in the present and more long-term missionary projects. To wrap up my argument, the dynamism of the Unity Church can be best understood through its position as "people 'in-between': in-between classes, in-between countries, in-between continents, languages and cultures" (Hutchinson and Wolffe 2012, p. 275).

Critics of the aid industry's turn towards the local bemoan that devolving responsibility to southern actors might not come with adequate funding and risks prioritizing some partners over others, thereby reproducing imperialist connections and local power structures (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018). Yet, the study of the Mafraq Unity Church shows that partners on the ground *strategically* engage with funders' priorities, by learning how to speak and act managerial, inclusive and localized "development scripts". It also reveals the conceptual limitations of the 'localization' agenda: given the flows of funding and volunteers that reach Mafraq from elsewhere, the boundaries between external and local actors have long been blurred (Carpi 2018). Nor is the Mafraq Unity Church representative of the town's inhabitants as its members make up a tiny fraction of the local population.

Most of all, my case study helps us understand that "development" is not a homogeneous project. Rather, it brings together diverse actors – European governments and local communities, the US and the Gulf states, secular NGOs and faith-based humanitarians – with different agendas and codes. In response, church members have engaged in multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discursive strategies. Some of these contradictions include the following questions: is giving aid in Mafraq a local or a global affair? Are Syrian refugees innocent victims or do they risk being corrupted by Islamists? Is Mafraq located at the centre or at the margins?

One way to think about these discrepancies is in terms of the "friction" produced in encounters between the local and the global (Tsing 2005). Most global projects do not unfold smoothly on the ground, nor are local realities simply integrated into – or heroically resist - global structures. Rather, southern actors get entangled in these structures, but also carve out spaces for agency within them. Although it resorts to globalized discourses and practices, the Mafraq Unity Church must be understood within its specific historical and geographic context. Despite its polyglot congregation, it remains deeply embedded in tribal fabrics and Jordan's peculiar state-building project. But "friction" is not merely a sign of deficiency. It also results in new forms of culture and power. For example, pre-war class inequality between Syrians and Jordanians has now been reformulated by the church in religious terms.

On a final note, I would like to return to the pastor's geo-religious vision of the Levant. Erecting the highest building in town heightened the church's visibility on a *local* scale, to fellow Jordanians and Syrian refugees. More importantly, live-streaming the construction to foreign Evangelical congregations, welcoming volunteers in Mafraq and representing the church at religious conferences abroad served to pinpoint its central position on the map of global Christianity. Of course, mapping the "Holy Land" is nothing new to Jordanians. Sixty miles south of Mafraq, the famous Madaba Map is the world's oldest remaining depiction of Jerusalem and the boundaries of the Holy Land, from Palestine to the Nile Delta. But anthropologists and geographers agree that mapping is not a disinterested intellectual or aesthetic exercise; rather, it is an instrument of power (Lund 2003). In truth, policymakers' "cartographic anxieties" (Saxer 2016, p. 112) *produce* territory, and nowhere is this more obvious than in my region of interest. It is certainly remarkable that missionary activity around Mafraq has taken place in such close proximity to the Syrian-Jordanian frontier, the outcome of the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement which divided the region into French and British spheres of influence and generated a new set of states and contested frontiers. Until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, vast stretches of the border close to Mafraq were hardly more than an imagined line in the sand, and frequently crossed in both directions for visiting family and seeking work on the other side. In a similar vein, when foreign volunteers in Mafraq claim "Jordan for you", what is implied is the reshuffling of the borders of Christian territory.

Pastor Aissa's mental map is not merely static, nor is it flat. Much like the original Madaba Map that served as a hands-on travel guide to pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, his georeligious vision is shaped by Evangelicals' travels. In his sermons and interviews, the pastor sketches out a multi-scalar geography, tracing connections from Mafraq to villages in Jordan and Palestine, to Arab capitals, the American Midwest, South Africa and Malaysia. Mafraq is relocated closer to the pulsating heart of the Holy Land, bulging towards the East to include the edges of the Jordanian steppe. How would one even represent the *virtual* spheres in which the church also operates? All of this makes being a "native" a complicated story, one in which rootedness and mobility go hand in hand.

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Disclosure statement

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