Keeping the Faith? Examining the roles of faith and secularism in "Syrian Diaspora Organizations" in Lebanon

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Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, different types of Syrian-run organizations in Lebanon have been providing support and assistance to Syrian refugees.[1] Whether in areas which are difficult for international providers to access, or in major towns and cities where international actors including the UN, INGOs and states have been providing assistance, Syrian diaspora organizations (DOs) have played a vital role. As is the case over the world, these DO initiatives have often taken the form of secular non-governmental organizations, or faith-based responses. At times, they have been actively funded by international donors or developed in formal partnership with UN agencies and INGOs,[2] while in other contexts they have taken place on the margins of (or at times in ways that directly challenge) formal humanitarian aid structures. In this chapter we explore the ways that secular and faith-based aid provision are understood by members of displaced communities based in settings that neighbor new and ongoing crises. We examine such transnational endeavors both through the frameworks of Southern Dos (as one mode of "Southern-led responses") and of "refugee-led responses" to displacement. More specifically, we explore the relationship – and in particular the tensions - that exist between expected 'global norms' of action which are seen as prerequisites for professional acknowledgment and inclusion – such as the principles of humanitarian neutrality - and the particularism of DO identities and patterns of aid provision. By doing so, we reconceptualise DO aid provision within the broader framework of the international systems which relate to the politics of humanitarian aid.

Syrian Diaspora Organizations in South-South Humanitarianism

The involvement of diasporas in humanitarianism is rapidly gaining momentum both as a field of academic study and as a modality of international aid provision for which diverse policies and support structures are being developed. This is, inter alia, a result of the growing recognition within the humanitarian system that DOs can act as quick and efficient brokers between formal aid actors and affected populations.[3] Indeed, since 2011, 75% of aid for people still inside Syria (including internally displaced people—IDPs) is reported to have arrived through local networks supported by Syrians living outside of that country.[4] In particular, many of these Syrian nationals have sought safety in Lebanon, from where they coordinate and distribute diverse forms of support, relief and assistance to Syrian refugees who have sought safety in Syria's neighboring countries.

These Syrian nationals based in Lebanon can therefore be classified as aid actors who engage in what we can refer to as "refugee-diaspora humanitarianism." "Humanitarianism" here broadly refers to the provision of assistance to conflict- and displacement-affected populations; in turn, the first part of this term (refugee-diaspora) centralizes the extent to which certain diasporas[5] may be constituted by "refugee groups which have fled political persecution, war and both colonial and post-colonial occupation and have maintained a cohesive sense of belonging on the basis of their exilic memory."[6] The intersections and outcomes of different forms and sites of memory and belonging,[7] as related to different processes of migration, settlement, and displacement, are relevant for the purposes of our study, as we situate our discussion of 'the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon' on a hybrid ground formed by at least two groups: both by earlier groups of Syrian migrants to Lebanon who made the "domestic abroad"[8] prior to the war,[9] and by people who arrived due to the outbreak of the war in 2011. The support offered by different 'generations' of Syrian nationals in this context to other people displaced by the ongoing conflict simultaneously exemplifies and yet transcends a localized mode of "refugee-refugee humanitarianism"[10] by virtue of diverse

transnational and diasporic connections and networks within, across and beyond the Middle East.

While acknowledging the roles played by individuals, families and diverse informal community groups in responding to displacement from Syria, in this chapter we examine the roles played by a range of Syrian providers based in Lebanon.[11] National legislation in Lebanon has required all of these organizations to be legally registered as *Lebanese* NGOs, and in many cases they have far fewer resources than other local Lebanese NGOs. Irrespective of this formal categorization of Syrian-led NGOs as Lebanese, for the purposes of this chapter we refer to these as groups as Syrian DOs, and we aim to situate and contextualize their positions and roles in Lebanon and further afield on the basis of our on-going research into Southern actors' responses to displacement from Syria.

Syrian DOs in Lebanon include organizations established and led by activists, ex-protesters, established Syrian migrant workers, and religious leaders who have become relief providers since the crisis broke out. In line with our interest in the roles played by Syrian nationals in responding to displacement, and in the significance of faith and secularism in humanitarian responses,[12] the chapter examines tensions between faith and secularism, and how such tensions play out in the initiatives developed by Syrian DOs, exploring how and with what effect faith, religion, and secularist frameworks relate to Syrian DOs. Second, we explore the reasons behind the act of establishing these organizations. This is particularly important in light of the strong financial and political support that a core group of popular secular(ist) Syrian DOs have received from international donors/agencies: These secular(ist) Syrian DOs have managed to be "rooted cosmopolitans",[13] adopting a transnational role between international and local communities. This type of DOs has often been used by the international community to pursue democratization goals in sending states.[14] In contrast, faith-based DOs play an important intermediary role for diaspora philanthropic acts,[15] —such

as providing money, goods, voluntary labor, knowledge, and skills for the social benefit of the community.[16] Nonetheless, secular and especially faith-inspired DOs have often been viewed by members of the international community (both in the context of Syria and more broadly) as being unable to fulfil key international humanitarian principles, in particular humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality. Indeed, they are assumed to prioritize political or sectarian dimensions through providing assistance (only or primarily) to their co-nationals, therefore reproducing and/or generating socio-economic inequalities.[17] This secular interpretation of the partialist nature of faith-motivated assistance[18] remains biased towards diaspora groups that mobilize within the global South (as members of the 'near diaspora'), where the source of global migration crises supposedly lies.

By assessing the role of faith and secularism in diaspora-led forms of assistance provision, and the way the principles and motivations underpinning assistance diversely impact humanitarian action, we primarily situate our analysis within the context of the official humanitarian apparatus' "localization of aid" agenda, which emerged as one of the key goals of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Localization purports to enhance partnerships and collaborations with local and refugee-led NGOs, to include local and refugee populations in provision activities, and to employ local staff to a greater measure.

After outlining how these Syrian DOs normally operate on the ground, we examine how faith is made either visible or invisible in these settings, and in turn explore the use of the discourse of "neutrality" to justify or reject different approaches to assistance. Finally, we trace how a sense of belonging in these Syrian DOs assumes multiscalar identity configurations.

Methodology

This chapter is informed by our individual and collaborative long-standing research into local and Southern-led responses to displacement from Syria.[19] This has included over 45 interviews conducted by Carpi in Beirut and northern Lebanon (Halba, al-Bireh and Tripoli) since 2017, and over 180 interviews conducted in Beirut, Baddawi camp and Jebel al-Baddawi as part of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's 'Refugee Hosts' project since 2016.[20] In particular, here we draw on in-depth interviews conducted by Carpi during March 2018 with Syrian nationals running DOs in Lebanon, as a means of gaining insight into these individuals' motivations behind their assistance provision and, in particular, the role of faith and secularism in their politics of aiding Syrian refugees. The interview extracts cited below are derived from Carpi's interviews with a Muslim Sunni *sheikh* from Syria who manages a high school for Syrian refugees in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli; a faith-inspired Syrian former aid provider in Tripoli; a faith-inspired refugee aid provider in Tripoli; a Syrian refugee man who provides aid to his co-nationals in a local mosque in the Akkar village of al-Bireh (northern Lebanon); and a secular refugee service provider in Beirut. Of these diaspora-started initiatives, all self-identified as Muslim, but provided assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon either through official faith-based organizations, or through secular*ized* organizations, a process we explore in more detail below.

Syrians in Lebanon

In the cases we analyze below, the term "Syrian diaspora" refers to Syrian nationals who either recently fled violence and persecutions or worked in Lebanon since before, and mostly improvized themselves as assistance providers. Here it is worth specifying how these Syrian providers acquire a transnational dimension in the Lebanese context. Notably, the term "diaspora" can simultaneously encompass all of the social classes that compose a mobile society, therefore not being homogenous.[21] Indeed, the mobilisation of Syrian diaspora

communit*ies* (in the plural) around the Syrian revolution and civil war has produced new *diasporic* identities and imaginations.[22] Such communities have mobilized either in support of or in opposition to the Asad regime "through the mobilization of material or symbolic links to homelands that are invested with moral dimensions."[23] In this sense, the creation of diasporic NGOs providing assistance and support to war-stricken co-nationals is one among many forms of political mobilizations.

In this context, "diaspora" successfully captures the transnational positioning of national groups that hold the same nationality, as they reside "between two countries, sharing in two cultures, having an emotional investment in two nations, and preserving social connections in two societies."[24] Importantly, "diaspora" does not necessarily presuppose the existence of a well-bounded community embracing all its national members within the receiving society: yet, it potentially allows us to discuss their presence and practices as members of a "diasporic group." Especially in the case of Syrian nationals in Lebanon, speaking of a pre-existing "Syrian community" would be misleading. The historical porousness of the Lebanese-Syrian border led Syrian migrants to take up seasonal labor and return to Syria on a regular basis; while Syrians have often been deeply connected to Lebanon, the likelihood of moving back and forth has not historically led to the construction of a well-bounded Syrian community within Lebanon.[25] Moreover, Lebanese labor and migration policies[26] have deliberately sought to prevent the creation of Syrian "enclaves" within Lebanese society, as has the troubled political relationship between Lebanon and Syria and the chronic fear of instability. In this context, diaspora as a concept allows for shifts in migratory processes from temporary and circular to permanent or semi-permanent.[27]

Establishing a "Syrian Diaspora Organization" in Lebanon

For the sake of clarity, we group Syrian DOs in Lebanon into two different categories. The first type is formed by DOs mostly started by longstanding Syrian migrants in the global North (especially in the United States). These Syrian DOs, which the scholarship describes as rooted in the history of Syrian migration from Greater Syria since the Ottoman Empire,[28] tend to work from outside the Middle Eastern region—mainly acting as donors or remittance actors,[29] which symbolize their attachment with the country of origin [30]—and generally have a thin presence on the ground. The second type is instead formed by *de facto* Syrian NGOs, which, as noted above, are legally prohibited in Lebanon. As a Syrian refugee service provider in Beirut contended: "In theory, only one Syrian for every three Lebanese employees could be hired, but it's not what actually happens".[31] Officially, the founder needs to be a Lebanese citizen, but, in practice, these DOs are largely run by Syrian nationals who recently fled the conflict, even though they cannot even open a bank account. We focus on this second category of Syrian DOs. Most of these DOs are officially secular, and most of their current activities revolve around social activism, education, and cultural initiatives rather than humanitarian practices per se, and are often seen as threats to the Syrian state.[32] Some of these Syrian DOs also engage in political activism, being themselves, in several cases, transnational forms of "politicized social formations." Indeed, our fieldwork findings to date show that our Syrian DO interlocutors have tended to define their own activities in "civic" terms—as *madani*—rather than as "humanitarian"—*insani*. In this second category, interviewees with DO leaders and members tended to mention the *insani* concept only when invited to do so, but never spontaneously. This suggests that humanitarianism is not the primary way that these NGOs define their own modes of assistance. Instead, they mostly defined themselves as civil society organizations.

Importantly, the members of this type of *de facto* Syrian DOs generally struggle to make ends meet on a monthly basis, and they are unable to send remittances to Syria or family members

who have resettled elsewhere. As has been extensively documented, many migrant groups in countries of the global South and North contribute to the development of their country of origin[33] and poverty reduction,[34] especially at a family and community level.[35] In contrast, the Syrian DO members interviewed in Lebanon do not form an enfranchised professional community, and instead suffer from "philanthropical insufficiency," in terms of limited resources and scale.[36] The relatively vulnerable social, legal, and economic position of these Syrian DO actors has been found to be common in South-South migration, as many South-South migrants are not wealthy and therefore have less to remit.[37]

The Ongoing Formalization of Assistance

According to the Syrian providers interviewed, *ad hoc* and informal modes of aid provision are the norm among *de facto* Syrian DOs. A Syrian refugee from Homs who engages in aid provision for his co-nationals in the Akkar village of al-Birah and exemplifies the diverse forms that diaspora aid can take, affirmed that he informally contributes to the charity activities of a local mosque that has no powerful communication means or outreach strategies:

> Everything we do is informal, people know about us *bouche-à-bouche* [through word of mouth], and we don't coordinate with others. We don't necessarily need an official space, as we want to avoid bureaucracy… Bureaucracy is about numbers, and my religiousness doesn't want my recipients to feel like numbers! We would just like to get the respect from the *sheikh* we work though, and the respect of the people we give good quality things to […]. We can still do something for our brethren.[38]

As reflected here, at times a lack of bureaucratization and small-scale systems of provision are deliberate choices. However, despite their informal nature and the spontaneous character of their assistance, some Syrian providers acknowledged the potential benefits of externally-provided support. For instance, Hadi, a Syrian aid provider and activist in Tripoli, affirmed that he regretted having rejected collaborations with INGOs and even the Syrian National Coalition in Istanbul in the past:

> At the beginning I didn't want to cooperate as I wanted to keep our independence and our work informal, but I now realize that I made the life of my own organization unsustainable.[39]

Indeed, such organizations have often changed in nature over time, with a Syrian refugee aid provider and activist in Tripoli explaining that their activities were initially definable as "initiatives" (*mubadarat*), rather than fully fledged "associations" (*jam'aiyat*).
Even when official partnerships with international donors and INGOs do not exist, Syrian DO initiatives do not take place in isolation from other locally, regionally and internationally-led responses. In this context, our Syrian DO interlocutors argued that *ad hoc* and non-professionalized modes of assistance are part of the same aid framework as other official entities which carry out humanitarian work on a larger scale and with many more means. By this token, a Syrian refugee providing aid to Syrian co-nationals in al-Birah argued:

> The first mother (*awal emm*) for me is always the UN… We're not *better* than them, their work is as valuable as ours. We only do what we can because we have solidarity with those living with hardships. Like the UNHCR in Syria… The UNHCR used to

do many things for refugees, and it's always at the frontline in addressing emergencies.[40]

Such Syrian DOs initially used to rely upon informal networks and ways of working, and upon volunteers, as often happens in DOs, which - with the exception of highly skilled and entrepreneurial diaspora members - often work through individuals who frequently travel to and weave networks with the country of origin rather than partnering with formal institutions.[41]

Although we refrain from defining Syrian DOs' *ad hoc* approach and limited outreach as "a challenge"—to us, this simply reflects a particular way of operating on the ground and not necessarily a structural limitation—it appears that the less bureaucratic NGO logistics are, the less likely they are to seek to increase their funding options. Nonetheless, at a gradual pace, many Syrian DOs started formalising their activities by strengthening their bureaucratic system when applying for large grants or becoming partners of large INGO projects, in addition to developing administrative capacities. Significantly, a Syrian refugee vocational school director indicated that:

> We're not like the Iraqis in Syria. They were resourceful, and able to cater for themselves. We're weak, and assistance provision is something new to us […] In Syria we seldom engaged in volunteering as there was no freedom, no civil society to work for, unlike in post-war Lebanon.[42]

This gradual process allowed Syrian refugee providers to turn their mostly free labor into a professional activity, with roles and activities that need proper funding, and that can now be taken seriously as fully-fledged humanitarian action. However, as a EU diplomat stated in an

interview in 2016: "The challenges are huge in Lebanon because of the legal framework. Those NGOs are strongly monitored by the government, especially by the banking system. So, for example, when they receive funds, and their CEO is Syrian, he [sic] has to justify every single Euro."

In short, Syrian DO members described the formalization process as a pathway that would have to be followed in order to generate sustainable livelihoods, to keep on pursuing their largely political and civic endeavors, and to be considered fully-fledged humanitarian actors and partners in the international arena. All of the interviewees stressed that most Syrian youth did not initially mean to become formal aid providers, making of humanitarian action their own life profession. This was also due to the short-term perspective that Syrian nationals initially had *vis-à-vis* the success of the uprising and the end of the conflict at an early stage. Refuge itself was conceived as temporary: "We thought that the conflict would have ended soon with regime change, as it occurred in other Arab countries," said Wissam, a Syrian refugee provider in Tripoli. "Eventually the conflict lasted and it's even going to survive me! So, our resources over the time got limited… we never had thought of having to develop a proper plan to be able to satisfy our people's needs."

Strengthening Syrian DOs through a localization approach?

In spite of the international donor community's increasing commitment to "localising" aid, *de facto* Syrian DOs in Lebanon face a series of challenges when attempting to 'scale up' and professionalize, and are simultaneously at risk of being instrumentalized by international organizations.[43] As noted by Brinkerhoff, it is often the case that international organizations do not respect DOs' organizational identity in the design and implementation of projects.[44] In addition, it has often been found that international actors tend to approach Southern actors as beneficiaries rather than fully fledged partners, not encouraging the latter's professional

development and expansion.[45] Yet, our interviewees affirmed that an apparent adaptation to

the western way of working—and even living—is somehow expected to be able to receive

funding and *feel* included and valued. As evidence of this, a Syrian provider explained that

aspiring Syrian humanitarians often adapt their lifestyle to Beirut's western-like ways of

living to feel accepted, and to make themselves more culturally suitable to receive

international funding: "To get western funding, which is generally more sustainable, we

started going to the streets of Gemmayze [an eastern suburb of Beirut popular for its

nightlife] and having beers."[46] This account further illustrates how international secular

donors and providers prefer partnering with those Syrian DOs which show a "secular" face.

In addition to their precarious legal status in Lebanon,[47] the main challenges that these Syrian

DOs face are, first, the volatile nature of funding; second, their lack of linguistic skills,

especially English, which often prevents them from communicating directly with donors

without the mediation of their international donor and NGO partners; and, thirdly, the effects

of implicit and explicit concerns held by donor states, UN agencies and INGOs that Syrian

DOs' motivations and modes of operation may be incompatible with their ethical standards

and the international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

As will be evident, these factors were reiterated in the interviews as the first reason behind

organizational weakness, therefore resonating with official statistics: according to a recent

study,[48] Syrian civil society organizations have difficulty access funding in Turkey and Syria

(77%), face security concerns (7%) and suffer from the unpredictable character of

governmental policies (5%), undermining their perception of being viable over time.

Furthermore, one of the present limitations of the localization approach resides in the actual

nature of local-international partnerships. The latter do not generally work horizontally, as

INGOs want to ensure compliance with their ethical standards, such as the traditional

humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. As we discuss below, some of these

Syrian DOs overtly took a political stance *vis-à-vis* the Syrian uprising and the subsequent repression, and, if supported by specific local parties, they have been looked down at. This is not peculiar to the Middle Eastern region, having also also occurred in Syrian diasporic groups residing in South America, such as Argentina and Brazil, where sectarian discourses, religious identities and transnational diasporic connections have been manoeuvred discursively by different political actors.[49] Against this backdrop, international actors are reluctant to start truly equal partnerships and distribute financial, executive and political power on an equal basis.

Rather than referring to a relationship between international and "local" actors, from a Syrian perspective "localization" was understood and explained as a shared *existential* status between providers and beneficiaries. Most interviewees believed that Syrian DOs can "give more" than INGOs because Syrian DO members who recently fled the conflict are victims giving to other victims. Rami, an Syrian DO worker, argued:[50] "How can an outsider understand how a displaced person feels, first humiliated with torture, detention, and persecution, then having his own house bombed, with no personal belongings left, and crossing the border, after trying to pursue a change?"

Overall, Rami and other interviewees argued, INGOs and UN agencies are less well placed than Syrian DOs to work directly with local and refugee communities in the countries neighboring Syria, as most of their staff cannot rely on the common idea and feeling of national belonging on the one hand, and the common experience of dispossession and displacement on the other.

Whether for this or other reasons, including logistical and political challenges, INGOs and UN agencies have proved to be increasingly interested in cooperating with Syrian DOs to ensure access to needed populations. As a Western diplomat affirmed, international actors are interested in working with what he defined as "hybrid NGOs" – i.e. Syrian-Turkish or

Lebanese-Syrian organizations - as "these people are willing to help their own people, they know the field, and even if they are young and not fully professional, they need support so that the international community can rely on them and they can be active members of the society." In other words, working with DOs in the region allows INGOs and UN agencies to develop more options for intervention in the future. Even though some of these Syrian DOs are not 'born and bred' in the countries neighboring Syria, they "have a leg" in both the country of origin and the country of intervention.[51]

The localization agenda opened up the possibility to further integrate diverse groups of providers (including faith-based providers) into official humanitarian programming.[52] While the international humanitarian apparatus has increasingly opened up to new partnerships with Muslim NGOs,[53] including the effort to access local beneficiaries easily and rapidly and to reduce international staff members' exposure to major risks in the field,[54] following the War on Terror, Muslim NGOs have been subjected to increasingly strict controls. And whether explicitly or implicitly, diverse barriers to faith-based or faith-inspired humanitarian actors remain in place, including secular organizations' and UN agencies' assumptions and fears relating to the motivations, nature and implications of faith-based responses.[55] Religion as a viable, professional, and effective component of service provision is far from accepted in humanitarian responses to Syrian refugees.

Secular *versus* faith-inspired assistance provision

Within Lebanon-based Syrian DOs, a small percentage are overtly faith-based initiatives, and generally do not formalise their provision of assistance to Syrian co-nationals. Their services mostly revolve around the provision of material aid, educational and cultural activities, often reaching out to externally-provided medical services when particular needs emerge rather than developing their inner structure. Some Syrian DO members working in these faith-

inspired initiatives explained that their reticence towards professionalization was founded on their belief that local and refugee faith leaders and communities approach humanitarian efforts as an essential part of their own spiritual life, with no need to build a career in this field unless financially needed.

Most Syrian DOs, in the very first instance, could hardly be distinguished from other civil society organizations: assistance provision, sustainable development, poverty reduction, and capacity-building were often mentioned as their official goals. In other cases, they affirmed that they play the role of implementing partners for international agendas. However, for all of the DO workers interviewed, religion was still a fundamental factor, although mostly in the form of private motivation for assistance.

Some of the Syrian refugee interviewees who informally partake in aid provision explained the religious nature of their humanitarian efforts as a synonym of humanitarian action:

> *Insaniyye* – 'humanity' - is the right word to define our services. It also means religious: If I provide you with the cup of tea you're holding in your hands I don't do it because I'm asking for anything in return. That is *insaniyye*. I do it because I want to be humane. To me humanitarian and religious are the same principle. They cannot work independently.[56]

In contrast, they maintained that *insani* could not be seen as a synonym of "political". When asked how exactly the humanitarian and the religious were two sides of the same coin, a Syrian refugee provider in al-Birah contended: "Our act of provision is necessarily religious… it could not be made without God's favor […]. This happens in any sort of humanitarian endeavor, also for non-believers, as it can only happen with God's will."[57] In

these accounts, humanitarian assistance provision, religiousness and the spiritual mission are all part of a singular endeavor.

Likewise, a Syrian provider who moved to Tripoli before the war and who considers himself a political refugee argued that the idea itself of 'receiving refugees' entails a political endeavor as much as a religious inspiration to him. In this sense, reception becomes an even greater duty for veteran Syrian nationals living in the Lebanese society:

> For me, *insani* means political—*siasi*—and religious— *dini*— altogether, not merely "human". Good politics cannot but come from faith. What primarily drove us to undertake relief work here in Lebanon was chivalry—*nakhwe* and *shahama*— towards my fellow Syrians. War-stricken Syrians were desperate and they came to Lebanon for help. We provided hospitality (*diyafa*), especially because some of us already knew Tripoli and have strong local connections. I even know how to simulate the Lebanese accent. It's helpful, as local people at times don't realize I'm Syrian. In some cases this allowed me to better help my refugee friends too: as a Lebanese speaker, I've often been able to ask for more support.

This idea of "chivalry" resonates with diaspora members' feeling of having a "cultural obligation"[58] to assist their co-nationals both within their country or origin and in the neighboring countries, and to provide them with educational and economic opportunities, mostly in the countries where DO members resettled.

Despite the importance of defining assistance as spiritual and faith-inspired, the provision of secular aid—*al-maʿunat al-ʿalmaniyye*—was portrayed by our interlocutors as something "modern", which looks friendlier and more flexible than religiously-driven assistance. In this regard, Wissam, a Syrian refugee provider, poignantly affirmed:

If you had to choose between Angelina Jolie and Saudi Arabia as aid providers, who would you go for? I'm sure you will pick up Angelina because she's modern, she's secular. But if Saudi Arabia [a country which is mostly interpreted through its religious identity] gives you much more money for the change you were looking for, would you really refuse?

This account unearths how Syrian activists and aid providers see the way the international community experiences and interprets their faith. Wissam confirms the secular-religious hierarchy in humanitarian action, and how faith has increasingly been marginalized and privatized.[59] While religion was disguised in what are commonly (and questionably) seen as primarily secular areas—like the eastern suburbs of Beirut, where symbols of Christianity mark the public space in many ways—religion explicitly returns to the public space through aid provision in Muslim-majority contexts such as the northern city of Tripoli, commonly considered the most religiously conservative in Lebanon. For instance, during the 2017 Ramadan, a Tripoli-headquartered Syrian DO organized Friday prayers and *iftar*—the meal eaten to break the fast after sunset during Ramadan—for both Syrian refugees and Lebanese residents. Hadi, the Syrian refugee provider who organized the initiative, affirmed that "The Tripoli municipality made no issues and provided us with a public park to do *iftar*. We also distributed dates with a small verse from the Holy Koran among the dining companions. As Syrians, we're rarely allowed to do this."[60] Hadi's words point to the frequent necessity for Syrians to refrain from engaging in public forms of religion *as Syrians* in Lebanon, and often to make their faith invisible overall. Hadi's observation underscores important factors which we now seek to unpack.

The use of the neutrality discourse in Syrian-run initiatives

Among the Syrian DOs, neutrality remained a valuable rhetorical strategy rather than an ethical imperative or a possible (let alone desirable) modality of operation. Mostly, Syrian DO members argued that campaigning through the discourse of humanitarian neutrality allowed them to remain safe and protected. Neutrality, in this vein, was discussed as a form of shelter, especially from some Lebanese parties that are overtly hostile to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. In this context, neutrality was mostly explained as a strategy of self-protection in politically-sensitive contexts.

In turn, some Syrian DO providers openly affirmed they would not provide aid to refugees who have supported the Asad regime in Syria, even though they affirmed that political neutrality was among their operational principles. A Syrian refugee provider contended: "The Syrians aligned with the Asad regime don't generally come to us because they need much less than us… They haven't been bombed like us. But even if they came, we would not want them".[61] Similarly, Wissam, who previously engaged in informal and *ad hoc* forms of aid provision, affirmed: "We didn't use to discriminate against the refugees who wanted to register with us. But we know that all of those were *our* people, *our* Syria, not the people who betrayed by supporting the [Asad] regime. We did not give aid to traitors".[62] In turn, certain mosques that collect donations for Syrian refugees are widely known in local neighborhoods on the outskirts of Tripoli for only providing assistance to people who denounce the regime.[63] At the same time, however, Wissam stated that Syrian refugees do not obtain much support either as revolutionaries or as providers because the regime's discourse prevails within the Lebanese territory:

> We're seen as terrorists, because we started a revolution. So, the internationals certainly do not want to fund terrorism. Our Islamic faith doomed us to scarcity of

capabilities and resources, so the same bias people had against us during the revolution stifled the resources needed to guarantee aid provision to Syrian refugees in Lebanon.[64]

For Wissam, the international community's mistrust towards the claims raised during the Syrian revolution has been reflected in the scarcity of resources provided to support refugee-refugee (especially faith-inspired) assistance processes in Lebanon:

> It's impossible for us to create NGOs in Lebanon, especially faith-based organizations. And now we're even more at the mercy of the Lebanese, we need to register any activity with their help, if we want to formalize it. If Lebanese people don't want us anymore, we need to shut down.

In other words, when made explicit, both the faith-related nature of Syrian services, and the sense of moral belonging underpinning their personal engagement in aid provision, were identified by interviewees as causes of international mistrust. While leading to mistrust among the international community, faith and the sense of moral belonging that the collective dimension of faith engenders come to the fore precisely as pull factors for civic and humanitarian engagement for these members of Syria's diasporic community. The accounts indicated an articulated relationship between faith and national belonging underpinning the act of assisting Syrian co-nationals, which unravels the heterogeneity of Syrian communit*ies* in Lebanon and their way of experiencing migration or refugeehood. As a Syrian refugee aid provider noted:

I provide relief items to my co-nationals not for political reasons. For example, taking care of orphans is very important in Islam. My main purpose is religious, but I also do this because I feel I belong to Syria and my people as a whole.[65]

In this account, faith meets with national belonging. However, this is not always the case. For most of the Syrian DOs we have interviewed, *insani* implies an exclusively religious purpose, which even counters the idea of a political entity artificially reshaping the boundaries of the Islamic *Ummah*, the supra-national Muslim community. In this regard, a Syrian refugee provider specified:

I speak of *din* ["religion"] not *watan* ["nation"] behind the decision of helping my people […]. The Syrian nation is fake: It's the product of the regime's governance, which wanted to show we were all one nation.

In this sense, providing assistance is not about supporting the Syrian nation *per se*, but rather supporting people affected by the conflict caused and propagated by the Asad regime. The religious motivation behind assistance provision was neither associated with "Arabness"— '*uruba*—nor with a collective feeling of belonging to the Syrian nation. These two collective imaginaries, according to some of our interlocutors, are artificial and even managed to divide people in history: "The Muslim world goes beyond, our vision goes beyond. There were political opponents from Hasake, Aleppo, and Palmyra having a very different idea about Syria. Especially Ghouta and Hama diverged during the 2011 protests." In other words, the "positionality"[66] of the Syrian diaspora emerges as diverse *vis-à-vis* the political future of Syria, paralleling different motivations behind diasporic assistance provision.

In spite of this internal heterogeneity among people who have resisted the Asad regime, in their capacity as aid providers in Lebanon, the Syrian DO members affirmed that they provide help to their co-nationals in the name of supporting their collective return to Syria. As Hadi, a Syrian activist and aid provider explained, "We build our role (*mishwar*) here to be able to return (*w haida marbut biqadiyet al-'awdeh*)." Likewise, the Syrian director of a school for Syrian refugee children in a Tripoli neighborhood, affirmed:

> We all want to return. There's no difference between us, the providers, and them, the beneficiaries. Because we are all displaced. And we're all tired to the extent that I just hope the regime will announce a general amnesty (*al-'afu al-'amm*) and we'll all be allowed to return to Syria.[67]

The Syrian DO members often pointed to the fact that, as refugees in Lebanon, they necessarily have strong opinions about their own country, their own condition of displacement, and the region. However, most of the DO members talked of the need to neutralize their action and their rhetoric *in the public space* as a way of professionalising aid and service provision, and guaranteeing partnerships with INGOs as well as international funding.

This need is of course paradoxical in so far as humanitarian neutrality has also long been a discursive strategy among international NGOs and donor states. In this vein, a European diplomat acknowledged that "European state responses to the Syrian crisis are neither 'impartial' nor 'neutral'", and that "a broad-scale re-evaluation of the position of these 'principles' in Northern-led humanitarian action in contexts of conflict-induced displacement" should be reconsidered.[68] Questioning INGOs' compliance with humanitarian neutrality and impartiality, European state representative posed the important question:

Is it neutral for a large INGO to be based in Damascus and have a partnership with the national Ministry of Health or of Agriculture, and have regime minders who say "I'm sorry you're going to work in this area but not there"?[69]

In light of these observations, the refugee providers we interviewed described aid provision not as a national project *per se*; rather, they situated it as part of a specific political project, which, especially when intertwined with religion, needs to be disguised from external observers in order for them to be viewed by the international community as 'accountable' actors which appropriately engage with the rhetoric of neutrality. Against this backdrop, Syrian diasporic providers within Lebanon are faced with a significant tension between their desire to preserve their own identity, and external requirements established by the international community of donors, UN agencies and INGOs. The latter expect DOs to adapt themselves to exogenous ways of working in order to gain recognition, be viewed as accountable actors, and be considered for inclusion in the official humanitarian sphere.

Conclusion

Syrian DO workers identified "bureaucracy", "financial sustainability", "professionality", and "logistics"—rather than neutrality—as key factors differentiating their own work from INGO and UN practices. While certainly representing a step ahead, the globally-promoted 'localization' agenda should energetically challenge unequal partnerships and unilateral transfers of knowledge between actors that are differently placed in the humanitarian sphere. In an effort to advance our understandings of the challenges and opportunities that these collaborations entail, we have examined such transnational endeavors both through the framework of Southern DOs and of refugee-led responses by configuring the identity and

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operational particularities of Syrian DOs in the broader framework of the global politics of aid. Against this backdrop, the process of formalizing of aid indicates how such DOs have no choice other than rendering themselves permeable to international standards and interests. For many people, creating or joining a DO represents a need to belong.[70] As shown above, for Syrian DO workers, this need to belong was articulated between vernacular particularisms in the modality of and principles underpinning assistance provision and religious identity, which looks beyond the context of the nation-state. Although not necessarily expressed in national terms, the Syrian DOs have aimed to reinforce their own identity in displacement, with the hope of recreating their own future social and political capital. In this realm, politics, national belonging, humanitarianism and faith interplay in complex ways, which cannot be captured by one-size-fits-all interpretations: at times these are used as synonyms, at other times as mutually exclusive concepts and practices behind DOs' acts of assistance and support. In this chapter, we have aimed to situate the principles and motivations that underpin assistance provision not only in the specificity of the social settings in which they are developed and implemented, but also in the irreducible variety of Syrian diasporic polities within Lebanon itself. By this token, faith, national and political belonging acquire specific meanings through the interaction of Syrian DO workers with local, regional and international actors, and with each other. In 'Northern-Southern' interactions, understanding how faith is rendered visible, disguised and tackled in discourse and practice emerges as an important litmus paper to track the everyday transformation of power relations within Syrian diasporic polities on which donor expectations are placed, as well as in local-international partnerships.

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[4] Imogen Wall, "The diaspora groups bringing aid to Syria," *The Guardian,* 5 June 2016.

[5] We employ the term "diaspora" as an inclusive and heuristic concept. In contemporary global politics, "diaspora has become the dominant descriptive term to portray emigrant communities that are being constituted as the domestic abroad" (Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad. Diasporas in International Relations*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[6] Thomas Lacroix and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Refugee and Diaspora Memories: The Politics of Remembering and Forgetting," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34, No. 6 (2013): 687, which develops a sustained discussion of the relationship between *diaspora* memories and *exilic* memories.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad. .*

[9] Syrian migrants who arrived in Lebanon for diverse reasons prior to the outbreak of conflict in Syria in 2011.

[10] Syrian nationals variously identify with and/or resist the label of "refugee", since many Syrians had previously lived in Lebanon as migrant workers and may continue to self-identify as migrants rather than refugees due to the connotations of the latter. See Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Repressentations of Displacement from the Middle East and North Africa," *Public Culture* 28, No.3 (2016a): 457-473; Estella Carpi, "Syrians in Akkar: Refugees or Neighbours?," *Refugee Host*, 2017a https://refugeehosts.org/2017/01/15/rethinking-hospitality-towards-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon/.

[11] Our chapter aims to contribute to the literature on the complex roles played by non-state actors in conflict and displacement situations.

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[14] Koinova, "Diaspora and International Politics: Utilising the Universalistic Creed of Liberalism for Particularistic and Nationalist Purposes," 9.

[15] Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, "Diaspora Philanthropy: Lessons from a Demographic Analysis of the Coptic Diaspora," *Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 43, No. 6 (2014): 972.

[16] Shawn Teresa Flanigan, "Crowdfunding and Diaspora Philanthropy: An Integration of the Literature and Major Concepts," *Voluntas* 28 (2016): 494.

[17] Flanigan, "Crowdfunding and Diaspora Philanthropy: An Integration of the Literature and Major Concepts," 498.

[18] Alastair Ager and Joey Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Refugee Hosts, *Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey: Emerging Evidence and New Approaches*, UCL Knowledge Exchange workshop report, 2018, https://refugeehosts.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/local-faith-report.pdf. As these publications note, academic interest in the roles played by 'DOs' has been paralleled by an increasing focus on the significance of faith and religion in humanitarian responses to displacement.

[19] This chapter is based on the "Southern-led Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey" project funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 715582 (see www.southernresponses.org) on which Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Carpi are jointly working, and "Local Community Experiences of and Responses to Displacement from Syria" (AHRC-ESRC Grant Ref AH/P005438/1 – see www.refugeehosts.org) led by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. It also draws on previous field research conducted in Lebanon by Carpi since 2017 and by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh since 2015. All names used throughout this chapter are pseudonyms, and personal identifiers have been modified or excluded in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

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