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Giving Aid Inside the Home

Humanitarian House Visits, Performative Refugeehood, and Social Control for Syrians in Jordan

Abstract:

Through a hospitality lens, the article looks at an Evangelical grassroots organization's practice of house visits to Syrian refugees in Mafraq, Jordan. It begins by situating the hosting practices of European volunteers in the context of Mafraq's multi-layered NGO environment and within the emerging literature on the role of transnational support networks in faith-based humanitarianism. A review of philosophical and anthropological literatures reveals how power dynamics and bordering practices shape the hospitality encounter. Its function as a scale-shifter between the local and the national makes "hospitality" well-suited for the study of displacement. Subsequent parts of the article explore volunteers' acts of infringement on Syrians' hospitality code that allow them to "contain" refugees' demands for aid.

The final section revisits Boltanski's theory of a "politics of pity" in communicating distant suffering. The set-up of house visits forces refugees to perform "suffering" which provides the raw material for volunteers' moving testimonies back home.

Keywords: displacement, Evangelical, hospitality, humanitarian house visits, immobility, spectacle, waiting

In spring 2016, I stepped out of a brick shack on the outskirts of Mafraq, a mid-sized town in northern Jordan. I had arrived some months earlier to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with

Syrian refugees for my doctoral thesis, and begun volunteering as an interpreter for VIVA¹, a grassroots Evangelical organization, that regularly delivered aid to Syrians' houses. This day, I was part of a team of Europeans distributing second-hand clothes and food packages. After another one of these visits, I stepped out into the dazzling sun, relieved to leave the tiny shed with its bare walls, broken windows, and dirty carpets behind me. On the threshold, a startling sight caught my eye. From the house next door, a young woman emerged. With her pale complexion and fair hair, she looked like *me*, except for her headscarf and long skirt—the way many Evangelicals dressed in Mafraq. I addressed her in the local Bedouin dialect, as if to say: “These are my Syrians! What are *you* doing here?” To my surprise, she calmly answered me in fluent Arabic. She was a South African doctor loosely affiliated with the local Evangelical church and had come to check on a pregnant Syrian woman.

What were we doing this day, two young academics socialized in the Global North, in a Jordanian backwater 10 miles away from a war zone? Why was I so possessive of these Syrians whose names I would soon have forgotten and to whom I would leave no contact number, a common practice of NGOs overwhelmed by requests for aid? This day, I was unknowingly defending my territory, but which territory was there to defend?

My instincts that day in wanting to help, but also to control “my” Syrians remind me of an arrival scene on the beaches of Lesbos, poignantly captured by Evthymios Papataxiarchis (2016). In 2015, at the height of the so-called “European refugee crisis,” a wild mix of aid workers, international volunteers, local fishermen, academics, journalists, and undefinable others were waiting on the island’s pebbled shores, rushing towards each newly arriving boat.

Papataxiarchis’s description recalls my volunteering experience in Mafraq: the co-presence of

professional and “lay” humanitarians, phones in hand, the role of heartfelt hugs in breaching language barriers, and volunteers’ obsession with the “frontline” (Papataxiarchis 2016: 5).

Yet one stark difference remains: on Lesbos, volunteers waited for refugees who had just survived the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean. In Mafraq, however, Syrians’ exile had long turned into protracted displacement. Inside their humble homes, Syrians spent many days waiting for aid workers to come and visit.

House visits are the corner stone of grassroots organizations like VIVA that pursue a *relational* approach to aid. They set the scene for authentic encounters with refugees across cultural and linguistic barriers. Turning refugees into “hosts” is meant to allow volunteers and Syrians to meet each other on equal terms. But house visits are also central to VIVA’s fundraising strategy. After their return to Europe, highly motivated participants often take it upon themselves to raise additional donations and recruit new volunteers. In this regard, their publicly shared recollections back home are as important as their physical presence in Mafraq.

In this article, I resort to the hospitality paradigm to examine how Syrian refugees in Mafraq, Jordan are subjected to new forms of humanitarian governance through VIVA’s practice of house visits. The article adds to existing studies on Syrian displacement that have investigated hospitality practices of refugee-receiving *states* and local *communities*, drawing attention to a hospitality constellation in which local hosts are replaced by a foreign grassroots organization altogether.

The article begins by situating the hosting practices of Evangelical volunteers in the context of Mafraq’s multi-layered NGO environment where aid providers compete over refugees, and within the emerging literature on the role of transnational support networks in faith-based humanitarianism.

It goes on to contextualize “hospitality” in the study of displacement. A brief review of philosophical and anthropological literatures reveals that hospitality is a “deeply hierarchical form of inclusion” (Rozakou 2016: 188). Hosts impose their rule over guests by enforcing spatial boundaries and choreographies. But hospitality also functions as a scale-shifter between the local and the national. This makes the concept well-suited to the study of interactions between displaced populations, host governments, locals and aid workers.

Subsequent parts of the article turn to VIVA’s own hospitality practices. Volunteers’ small acts of infringement on the hospitality code allow them to “contain” the hospitality encounter and Syrians’ demands for aid. Ultimately, who is in control of these meetings are not refugee hosts – but their *guests*.

The final section turns to the performative dimension of VIVA’s house visits. I revisit Boltanski’s theory of a “politics of pity” in communicating distant suffering, arguing that volunteers’ first-hand experience of Syrians’ plight and their later testimonies to a European audience cannot be studied in isolation from each other. The set-up of house visits forces refugees to perform generic “suffering” in front of foreign volunteers, which provides the raw material for future moving testimonies.

The article ends by putting into conversation the role of house visits in the refugee response in the Global South on the one hand, and in immigration control in the Global North on the other.

Background and Methods

This article is based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2016/17 in Mafraq, originally home to a population of about 100,000 Jordanians. Syrian refugees started arriving en masse

during the siege of Homs in early 2012. In 2018, the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) statistics counted circa 84,000 Syrians in Mafraq (UNHCR 2018), although the town's mayor had estimated their number at 100,000 at the time of my fieldwork (personal communication, 2016).

My fieldwork coincided with a specific phase in the host country's approach to "welcoming" Syrian refugees. Since 2014, new governmental regulations had severely restricted Syrians' freedom of movement across the border and in urban areas, as well as access to the labor market and public healthcare. Urban refugees like those in Mafraq were also hit hard by cuts to the World Food Programme's voucher system in mid-2015 (Achilli 2015; Bellamy et al. 2017).²

Evangelicals have a longstanding presence in Mafraq. In 1965, an American doctor founded the An-Noor Sanatorium for chest diseases to deliver medical services, but also the gospel, to Bedouins in the area. The Mafraq Unity Church, an associate of a global Evangelical movement, was established in 1948. Today, it has turned into one of the main aid providers for Syrians (Wagner 2018). As for my own engagement with VIVA, it comes out of the specific challenges that I faced when preparing to undertake anthropological research in my field site. I had chosen Mafraq to study Syrians' mobility histories because of its proximity to regional transport arteries and the Syrian border, but also because it is symptomatic of the urban nature of displacement in Jordan. However, the absence of public meeting spaces and Mafraq's conservative culture made it hard for me to befriend refugees or locals. House visits as an unpaid interpreter with a grassroots organization were a time-efficient way of establishing contact with a large number of potential informants.

My Arabic skills were key to the volunteering experience. VIVA was run by four paid staff members from Western Europe residing in Amman, former teachers with no professional

experience in the development sector, and also no Arabic skills. Most of the European short-term volunteers who came to Mafraq for a week or two in spring and autumn had a background in health and care professions, but did not speak any Arabic either. Except for a young local man in Mafraq, the organization had no other permanent bilingual volunteers on the ground. Since the NGO's focal points in the refugee community were often women who preferred interacting with members of the same sex, I soon became a central node in the communications between the organization and its beneficiaries.

Originally, house visits were a method of accessing the field, but soon turned into a research subject of its own. My initial lack of interest in these "hospitality encounters" resonates with Matei Candea and Giovanni Da Col's (2012) finding that in anthropological study, hospitality has often been overlooked not only because of its proximity to gift-giving—itsself a much more famous concept—but also because of its double nature as a theme and the precondition to conducting fieldwork.

Finally, my double role as a researcher and NGO volunteer posed specific challenges in terms of my position in the field that I addressed in the following ways:³ When asking questions beyond my role as an interpreter during NGO-led house visits, I told my Syrian counterparts about my "study on refugees and their lives in Mafraq" and I explained the nature and aims of my research program in the UK, using appropriate language. I also asked for permission to meet again to dig deeper into family histories and narratives of displacement in my capacity as a researcher, not as an NGO member. Before conducting formal or semi-formal interviews, potential interlocutors were told that any data collected for the sake of my research would be anonymized and would not be used in a way that could compromise their access to humanitarian assistance or their legal situation in Jordan. All informants, but especially females, were assured

that information about domestic issues would not be shared within the refugee community. Syrians were told that refusing consent to participate in my study would have no impact on their continued relationship with VIVA. Because of Syrians' low levels of literacy and fear of repercussions from Syrian secret services, the humanitarian sector and the host state, consent was obtained verbally. During subsequent visits to the field, I have begun to present my findings informally to key informants.

However, despite my explanations about my double role as a volunteer and a researcher, it is not unrealistic to assume that informants were hoping for further support during these second encounters. While I offered my help with humanitarian bureaucracy, providing information about refugee services and negotiating with NGOs on Syrians' behalf, I could not deliver the more continuous financial support that they were aspiring to.

Foreign volunteers, on the other hand, were aware from the onset that I was working with VIVA to gather data for my doctoral research. At times, VIVA staff emphasized my identity as an "academic" when asking me to give briefings about Syrians' situation in Jordan to newcomers. However, the fact that my position—situated somewhere between an unpaid interpreter, scout, and occasional teacher—was never set down in writing reflects the NGO's informal ways of operating. Its staff showed little interest in discussing my findings. This was not the result of their indifference, but rather the fact that we spoke different "idioms of development" and framed Syrians' needs differently. Before my PhD, I had worked briefly with a UN agency and was thus familiar with mainstream development discourse. By way of contrast, VIVA's interactions with Syrians in Mafraq were informed by a "language of the heart" that I will explore below.

Humanitarian Response at the Margins

The prominence of house visits in Syrians' everyday lives is a consequence of Mafraq's position at the margins of the institutionalized humanitarian system, paradoxically favored by its location in the vicinity of a refugee hot spot. When nearby Zaatari camp was established in June 2012, it received the bulk of attention from international aid agencies. Although many camp inmates subsequently settled in Mafraq, the local UNHCR sub-office only opened in August 2014. The initial gap in humanitarian service provision encouraged the mushrooming of local and foreign faith-based charities and small NGOs (Dickinson 2014). Jordan's lenient policy environment—Western volunteers enter the country on a tourist visa—further encourages the influx of grassroots organizations, and many Syrian refugees in Mafraq receive support from more than one.

The emergence of a multi-layered humanitarian landscape with ever-changing coalitions and turf battles has also been observed in post-tsunami Sri Lanka (Stirrat 2006) and in Greece during the mass arrival of refugees (Papataxiarchis 2016). What many smaller NGOs and charities in Mafraq have in common with grassroots actors in Athens (Rozakou 2012) is their uneasy relationship with the institutionalized humanitarian system and the host state. For example, VIVA showed little interest in attending monthly inter-agency meetings at the local UNHCR office, and only registered as a charity in Jordan more than a year after taking up its activities in the country. However, while the presence of volunteers on Greek beaches in summer 2015 received much media coverage, it has hardly been discussed for places closer to the origin of the Syrian refugee crisis.

As in post-tsunami Sri Lanka (Stirrat 2006), the challenge was not so much the lack of funding. As the next section explores, faith-based charities survived through tapping into

alternative networks abroad. Rather, humanitarian “competition focused around control of beneficiaries rather than donors” (Stirrat 2006: 16). The aim of this article is to show that this control is mainly exerted through hijacking Syrian refugees’ movements and time.

Disaster Evangelism—Or Tourism?

“Disaster evangelism” is a term I borrow from Marisa Olivo Ensor (2003). I did not immediately identify VIVA as “Evangelical,” as its official website and Facebook page offered no indication of its religious affiliation. Over time, I noticed that humanitarian house visits occasionally included prayers. When I expressed my discomfort with translating prayers, a member of the NGO reacted defensively: if I did not understand that prayers, not aid, were at the heart of these visits, then I should quit volunteering. However, my knowledge of Arabic and Mafraq’s winding streets soon trumped ideology and I continued working with VIVA, without translating religious content.

Several short-term volunteers confirmed to me that they were affiliated with the same Evangelical network back home. In Mafraq, the NGO occasionally used the premises and borrowed material from the local Evangelical church. In early 2017, I attended a conference for VIVA’s supporters in Europe. It provided a platform for speakers well-known in Evangelical circles, including a neuroscientist advocating for the links between science and scripture.

That VIVA’s Evangelical underpinning was not openly advertised might be ascribed to the fact that proselytization is illegal in Jordan (El Nakib and Ager 2015). However, downplaying its religious motivation also allowed it to attract a diverse range of volunteers from Europe, including outspoken atheists. This said, Christians were usually in the majority during volunteering missions.

Therefore, my case study adds to the emerging body of research on faith-based humanitarianism (e.g. Ager and Ager 2015; Barnett and Stein 2012). While religion's role in displacement was long reduced to a cause for conflict, more recently academics have begun to investigate how religious beliefs and practices shape the humanitarian response (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a). Studies so far have highlighted the contribution of international faith-based NGOs (e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b) and local faith communities (e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager 2013; Wilkinson, this volume; Wagner 2018). However, the great diversity of faith-based actors with regard to scale, histories, funding, and degrees of adherence to humanitarian neutrality and impartiality makes it hard to come up with universal definitions (Ferris 2011). In Mafraq, VIVA operated alongside international faith-based NGOs like Caritas and World Vision, other grassroots Evangelical NGOs, a Jordanian Evangelical church, and even independent missionaries. What all of these had in common was their embeddedness in transnational support networks, especially in Europe and the US (Bornstein 2012; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b). It is widely acknowledged that faith-based humanitarians bring special resources to the field, including shared spiritual identities, alternative sources of funding, and a large pool of—often unpaid—volunteers (e.g. El Nakib and Ager 2015). VIVA's volunteers paid for their travel costs, accommodation in Jordan, and brought material and financial donations. Taken together, their individual contribution amounted to thousands of pounds.

However, it was not only noble motivations that brought many visitors to Mafraq. A long-term volunteer told me: “At the end of the visit, [the Syrians] should know that *we* were happy to be here with them.” Many volunteers also combined their trip to Mafraq with a visit to the Dead Sea and Jordan's ancient ruins. Volunteers' expectations recall studies on “disaster tourism” that draw attention to foreign visitors' motivations for visiting precarious places, and

the conflicting emotions it might entail—curiosity, compassion, but also anger and fear (Tucker et al. 2017).

Contextualizing “Hospitality” in the Study of Displacement

In Mafrq, humanitarian house visits occur within a cultural context where hospitality is highly valued, where a man’s social status is measured by his ability to entertain guests (Abu-Lughod 1986; Shryock 2012), and splendid performances of hosting are a competitive and gendered way of cementing social hierarchies and local elites (Meneley 1996). Recent critiques of hospitality are often grounded in Jacques Derrida’s theory of “hostipitality” (Derrida 2000a), a portmanteau term combining “hospitality” and “hostility,” that captures the tension between a commandment of unlimited hospitality—unless the host be denounced as greedy—and the host’s need to remain in charge of the events under his roof. This leads to a paradoxical situation where, by granting unlimited hospitality, the host risks abolishing his own mastery, and thus the foundations of his ability to receive guests (Derrida 2000b).

Derrida’s approach has informed a tradition of critical thinking about the relationship between hospitality, sovereignty, and colonial legacies. Yet to make sense of the intertwinement of *actual* practices of inclusion and exclusion, I suggest turning to the work of anthropologists who have long been aware of the aporia at the heart of hospitality. Julian Pitt-Rivers famously defined hospitality as a framework for the “problem of how to deal with strangers” (Pitt-Rivers 2012: 501)—it makes generous receptions the right way of receiving a potentially dangerous other. Successful hospitality renders the stranger’s threat harmless through intricate choreographies and imposing spatial boundaries (Pitt-Rivers 2012). “When a Jordanian says, ‘My house is your house’, he does not mean all of it. He means that part which forms the stage

for hospitality” (Shryock 2012: S24). Hospitality spaces are thus uneven; doors might be shut and guests’ mobility contained.

Anthropologists have also pointed out the double role of guests in households and nations (e.g. Herzfeld 1987). As Pitt-Rivers remarks about his fieldwork in Andalusia: “For I was not only a stranger to the local community but to the national community” (2012: 512). In Jordan, hospitality has become a major feature of post-independence *national* identity, to the extent that its commodified version figures prominently in the heritage industry (Shryock 2004). But it also informs an increasingly restrictive refugee response. Like many of its neighbors, Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Iraqi and later Syrian refugees have been received as “guests” (Achilli 2015; Mason 2011), a choice of words to be understood in the context of repeated displacement of Palestinians to Jordan since 1948, for whom the term “refugee” was long reserved in official discourse (Mason 2011). A recent news article exemplifies the extent to which the guest discourse has permeated policy and public talk about displacement: “Population stands at around 9.5 million, including 2.9 million *guests*,” a headline of the *Jordan Times*, Jordan’s English daily newspaper, ran in January 2016.

In the context of the Syrian civil war, the concept’s role as a scale shifter between the local, the national, and the international has gained prominence with academics, humanitarians, and policy actors. Neighboring countries’ hospitality for Syrian “guests” has received much praise as an indigenous alternative to the Western human rights-based regime, anchored in mutual cultural and religious traditions (El Abed 2014), the Ottoman legacy of ethnic and religious minority networks (Chatty 2017), Pan-Arab ideology (Mason 2011), and, on the local level, processes of refugee–refugee solidarity in contexts of overlapping displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). Critics point out that applauding host states’ generosity risks masking their lack

of commitment to international refugee law, and coincides with an alarming tendency to downgrade refugee protection worldwide (Crawley and Skleparis 2017). Hence, studies have explored the role of hospitality discourse in staking political claims to contested territories and unloading refugee protection on third parties in Jordan (El Abed 2014; Stevens 2013) and Lebanon (Janmyr 2017), and the discrepancies between hospitality rhetorics, practices of exclusion, and power struggles between hosting and hosted communities (e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Mason 2011).

So far, critics of refugee hospitality have focused on host states (e.g. Mason 2011) and aid organizations within refugee camps (Bulley 2015) and detention centers (Rozakou 2012). However, the hospitality of humanitarian actors in urban settings has hardly been addressed, a laudable exception being Estella Carpi's study of NGO-sponsored hosting of refugees in a Lebanese border town. In Akkar, older cultures of cross-border exchange and solidarity were lost when NGOs started paying local families for hosting Syrian refugees, converting hospitality as a moral duty into a short-term and commodified tool of humanitarian aid (Carpi and Senoguz 2018).

Leaving aside Lebanon's more complex multiethnic demographic make-up and its legacy of Syrian occupation, what my field site has in common with Akkar is a longstanding history of Syrian labor migration, although dehistoricized approaches to humanitarian hosting rarely acknowledge existing connections between Syrians and their hosts. In both cases, the institutionalization of hosting turns Syrians with whom locals have long intermittently cohabited into "others." It also obscures refugees' legal limbo in Lebanon and Jordan, emphasizing instead their need to perform as "good guests."

In comparison with commodified hosting in Akkar, however, VIVA's practice of humanitarian house visits in Mafraq turns the tables. It forces Syrians to be "good hosts", not towards locals, but foreign volunteers.

Taking hospitality seriously forces us to acknowledge the tension between inclusionary and exclusionary processes that the concept captures. This allows us to shed light on specific forms of social control that humanitarian house visits generate and perpetuate.

Taking the Host Hostage

Recently, philosophical thought has shifted the focus from "bad hosts" and the ways in which they exclude their "guests" to the flipside of unlimited hospitality: by swapping around the power dynamics inherent to the hospitality encounter, guests may take the host hostage (Baker 2010). This line of reasoning can be fruitfully applied to VIVA's humanitarian house visits. Even though visits to refugees are meant to reverse the host/guest hierarchy that Syrian aid beneficiaries are subjected to in Jordan, they might still lead to volunteer-guests taking control over refugee-hosts.

In Athens, volunteers framed their visits to squatter buildings occupied by refugees as a political act to give back agency to non-citizens. Still, they put pressure on squatters to move into more permanent dwellings, restoring them to sedentary lives, the very precondition to the enactment of hierarchical hospitality encounters (Rozakou 2012). Analogously, I argue that, while containment in refugee camps and detention centers is a flagrant example of control exerted upon refugees, VIVA engages in more subtle strategies of dominating the host-guest encounter.

Different from middle-class Jordanian households in Mafraq, where one finds a sumptuously furnished reception room, most Syrians can hardly afford to set a room apart for fulfilling their hospitality duties. Guests are received in the ordinary living room, equipped with mattresses and cushions. However, similar restrictions on their movements apply. It is unthinkable that guests would gain access to other parts of the apartment, especially rooms where women are unveiled. Yet I frequently witnessed foreign aid workers leave the living room. More than simple ignorance of cultural norms, these infringements of domestic space were partly motivated by check-ups on refugees' "hidden" possessions—not as far-fetched as it might sound in a town where Syrians frequently resell humanitarian goods.⁴ But spatial boundaries are also overstepped at a micro-level. Male volunteers sat next to women, and to a Syrian friend's great dismay, one of the foreign guests dared to serve herself tea from the kettle—a task reserved for the host.

Volunteer-guests also interrupt hospitality *choreographies*, for example by refusing refreshments. More broadly, Syrians are confined to long spells of waiting for the relieving phone call. As one frustrated Syrian woman complained to me: "We sit at home and wait, but no one ever comes." Since numerous aid organizations in Mafraq engage in house visits, many refugees lose track of the NGOs they signed up with, adding to the sense of confusion when aid teams arrive. Not that "waiting" per se is always pathological. Successful hospitality even relies on the opportunity to return the welcome at a later time (Pitt-Rivers 2012). However, while volunteers are usually offered drinks, withholding contact information—as well as the distance to Amman where VIVA's permanent staff members reside—assures that the favor cannot be repaid. Waiting for a visit contributes to a wider temporal logic of disruption and unpredictability that Syrians in Mafraq are subjected to in the informal economy and by the humanitarian system.

Conflicting Performances and the Spectacle of Suffering

Alleviating the physical, and increasingly also the psychological, suffering of others is at the heart of humanitarianism and sets it apart from related endeavours like “development”, which focuses on the economic dimension of crises, and human-rights based approaches that target their legal side (Redfield & Bornstein 2011). An emerging body of literature investigates the role of distance in conditioning the humanitarian response (Kennedy 2009). Are we more inclined to give to those close to us in space, but also socially and culturally? In this regard, VIVA’s relational approach to aid, aiming to maximize closeness with Syrians, differs from “a generalized care of strangers [...] and from the neutral, impartial ideas of secular humanitarianism as advocated by the UN” (Redfield & Bornstein 2011: 10).

In turning to the performative dimension of hospitality, the final part of this article addresses another dilemma that VIVA’s volunteers faced in Mafraq. They expected to see genuine suffering, but Syrians were caught between their obligation to be generous, as hospitality is a corner stone of their cultural and religious beliefs, and the need to demonstrate material destitution, so they could qualify for more and future assistance. When follow-up visits occurred, Syrian hosts often tried to restore indigenous codes of hospitality by serving splendid lunches— a heavy burden on their wallets, as one of my friends admitted. In Mafraq’s living rooms, assessing, witnessing and performing suffering was therefore far from straightforward. And the representation of Syrians’ suffering also played an important role in VIVA’s media outreach strategy. Therefore, this section brings together what volunteers saw and how they communicated their experiences afterwards. It adds to wider discussions about the commodification of suffering for organizations’ marketing material and refugee advocacy in the Global North (Pupavac 2008).

From the start, representations of Syrian suffering in the media were a central component of volunteering with VIVA. Many short-term visitors admitted to me that watching news about the Syrian war had first arisen their interest in helping refugees. Indeed, Syrians' plight has received unprecedented amounts of coverage from mainstream media. It is also considered "the first social media war" (Doucet 2018: 142) of our time. In his book of the same title, Luc Boltanski (2004) asks how spectators deal with "distant suffering" when there is no opportunity for direct action. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, he analyses a specific form of politics premised on distant suffering, a "politics of pity" that emerged in the Age of Enlightenment. Boltanski presumes that witnessing the misery of others, even remote, cannot fail to move us, creating a sense of moral responsibility. However, choosing an appropriate course of action is not only complicated by spatial separation, but also by the unpredictable reactions of others.

Sending money to big agencies like the UNHCR and Save the Children squares badly with VIVA's hands-on and anti-institutional approach to aid. Besides paying, another form of commitment that Boltanski discusses is pursuing a "politics of pity" in the public sphere. To arouse the pity of the audience, suffering must be depicted in concrete and personalized ways. Nevertheless, it also requires acts of distancing: to be credible, the speaker must assume the role of "an uninvolved spectator" (Boltanski 2004: 34). For a "politics of pity" to be efficient, speaking about distant suffering thus combines more general statements with hyper-singular snapshots: "it is that child there who makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same" (Boltanski 2004: 12).

At first sight, VIVA volunteers did something very different. By travelling to Mafraq, they broke through the TV screen and created opportunities for direct interventions into Syrians' lives which are out of reach for most ordinary Europeans. But they also did not want their

commitment to Syrians to end there. Through testimonies to potential donors and volunteers back home, they remained involved in VIVA's activities. The personal connections between VIVA's staff members and volunteers within the same religious network also encouraged more long-term commitment. In speaking up in the public sphere in Europe, they engaged in a "politics of pity".

Realizing that the latter necessarily combines acts of detachment and connection helps us understand the tensions that arose during VIVA's house visits and the types of "hospitality" that volunteers hoped to see. While the distance between foreign volunteers and beneficiaries seemed to be momentarily collapsed, it was actually reified by performances of suffering that enabled future speech acts informed by a "politics of pity" back home.

First, VIVA's house visits were conducted in a way that made it difficult for volunteers to listen to individual stories of suffering. As an interpreter, my role was to translate for European volunteers who had traveled thousands of miles to be face to face with Syrian refugees. But most volunteers did not ask questions beyond the standard exchange of refugees' first names and regions of origin. In the middle of a conversation, guests blew up balloons, played with the children or initiated prayers. This led to the breakdown of the dialogue with the hosts. As the interpreter, I found myself in the uncomfortable situation of having hardly anything to translate.

Second, these visits created an "emotional imperative" to be complied with: refugees had to create an affective connection with the one-time guests for the sake of survival, and were expected to show diverse, positive and negative emotions: despair, gratitude and joy. A friend cynically remarked about another Syrian woman: "She kept her living room deliberately shabby and furnished it with worn-out mattresses only. When organizations visit her, she starts crying and complaining about her suffering and poverty." This example shows that Syrians exhibited a

degree of agency in their strategic engagements with humanitarian codes. And proselytization did not lead to mass conversions. Syrians sometimes appealed to their visitors' faith. For example, one woman reported a vision of the virgin Mary to receive a follow-up visit (cf. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b).

Portraits on VIVA's Facebook page and website show happy Syrian families and children with their new "gifts" and during playtime. Volunteers' online testimonies emphasized the life-changing quality of these visits for Europeans and Syrians alike and the co-existence of extreme destitution and shared moments of joy. They adopted a "topic of sentiment" (Boltanski 2004: 77) that directs the focus away from the causes of Syrian displacement to "the unfortunate's gratitude inspired by the intervention of a benefactor" (77). With their own affective reactions, volunteers vouched for Syrians' suffering or, as Boltanski puts it, "emotion creates truth" (82). In this regard, Syrians were relevant to VIVA's house visits to the extent that their individual suffering provided an illustration of refugees' overall situation in Mafraq - the raw material for moving tales to a European audience. The singularity of the suffering person was effectively erased.

I do not insinuate that Syrians perceived house visits as violent. In a dull town like Mafraq, many enjoyed them because of their entertainment value. As one Syrian woman confessed to me, receiving foreigners was also cheaper than hosting fellow Arabs. However, Boltanski's analysis of the "politics of pity" has another dimension, one more closely related to the workings of the aid industry and how one becomes "eligible" for aid. Representing aid workers as compassionate and refugees as suffering is far from unique to the humanitarian context in Mafraq. As early as the 1890s, American Evangelicals capitalized on improved communication technologies to publish moving images and raise donations for the survivors of the Indian famine. Curtis (2012) ascribes to Evangelicals a central role in the advent "pictorial

humanitarianism” (159), although even at the time, the depiction of aid beneficiaries as hapless victims was far from uncontroversial among believers. Beyond the confines of religion, the entanglement of moral sentiment with assistance is central to contemporary humanitarianism. Against the backdrop of a shift from a regime of human rights to a regime of compassion, where humanitarianism relies on principles of charity rather than justice, "generosity" rather than "entitlement", demonstrating one's suffering has become central to accessing aid – an argument most famously developed by Didier Fassin (2012). Despite VIVA's anti-institutional approach, its practices had effects similar to those of mainstream humanitarian actors like the UNHCR. This becomes clear if one looks at how volunteers made decisions about future support for Syrians.

Despite their comical appearance, these encounters had potentially severe consequences. Not only the language barrier, but rather the entire setup—brief visits, a focus on playful activities rather than talk, disrespect for family hierarchies coupled with ignorance of the humanitarian landscape in Mafraq—made it impossible to evaluate Syrians' needs. Oftentimes, volunteers were confused about the number of household members. Therefore, decisions about follow-up visits were often based on “mutual liking” instead of tangible assessment criteria. “Refugeeness” turned into a performance where neediness had to be demonstrated through short stereotypical narratives of flight and life in exile, but mostly visual markers of destitution.

Despite VIVA's anti-institutional approach, this is similar to the curtailing of refugees' first-hand experience by the categories of the UNHCR's (and others') humanitarian bureaucracy. Narratives of suffering are central to authenticating claims to asylum and assistance, but what constitutes a credible story is far from self-evident. For example, refugees have to tailor their accounts to legal and bureaucratic categories during UNHCR resettlement interviews (Sandvik

2009), and NGO reports construct “refugee identity in terms of a knowable constellation of physical and economic needs” (Rajaram 2002: 253). Even reports meant to give voice to aid beneficiaries often rely on decontextualized visuals (e.g. Malkki 1996) and quotes (Rajaram 2002), “positive counter-stereotypes” (Pupavac 2008: 287) of suffering instead of individual life stories, and NGO staff frequently downplay their own role in compiling refugee narratives (Rajaram 2002). Consequently, what is at the stake is not so much the truthfulness of refugees’ narratives, but rather how the workings of the humanitarian system “choreograph suffering and empathy” (Sandvik 2009: 241).

In sum, during VIVA’s house visits, Syrians were encouraged to perform suffering and a related set of emotions – despair, joy and gratitude - in spectacular ways. If enacting “hospitality” involves negotiating belonging and reaffirming boundaries, then these performances drew a line between those who suffered and their compassionate audience, but also, more practically, between Syrians who performed “well” enough to qualify for future assistance, and those who did not.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on anthropological and philosophical literatures to argue that, if we bid farewell to romanticized understandings of “hospitality,” the concept captures the tension between concurrent processes of inclusion and exclusion. This makes it well-suited to the study of power dynamics inherent to the humanitarian encounter. I have presented a case study of a grassroots Evangelical NGO, originally from Western Europe, that conducts house visits in a town in northern Jordan where aid actors of various sizes “compete” over Syrian refugees. Using “hospitality” as a lens through which I explore VIVA’s practice of house visits helps us

understand volunteers' conflicting engagements with Syrian refugees, their longing for authentic, equitable and personal relationships, but also practices of detachment. Budgetary and time limits, cultural and linguistic barriers restrict how much and what volunteers can give. Through small acts of spatial and temporal control, they manage to "contain" Syrians' demands for aid. What volunteers expect to see – and talk about back home - also shapes their interactions with refugees. Encouraging Syrians to perform generic "suffering" conflicts with their hosts' values of hospitality and makes it difficult for volunteers to assess refugees' needs. The deindividualized and apolitical representations of suffering that house visits engender are not unlike those produced by mainstream humanitarian bureaucracy. On a side note, the uncoordinated spending of grassroots organizations has contributed to the tripling of rents in Mafraq, exacerbating resentments among natives.

I would like to conclude with two reflections. First, research on faith-based humanitarianism helps us understand how localized humanitarian practices of Evangelical organizations go hand in hand with global projects (cf. Wagner 2018). Organizations like VIVA, although far from cost-efficient, persist because they tap into unique transnational support networks. House visits never led to Syrian conversions and were framed as emergency relief. But VIVA's founder, a successful entrepreneur, had more long-term plans for creating "business opportunities" for refugees and locals alike. Its members also ran artistic "reconciliation projects" involving young Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians, not with the aim of addressing underlying issues of justice and power, but to "pacify" young Arabs. Evangelicals' imagined geographies help us understand how their engagement in northern Jordan fits into wider religious agendas. While bigger aid agencies' initial neglect of Mafraq had brought them there, Evangelicals were also attracted by its proximity to the Holy Land.

Second, compassion-inducing encounters with refugees are a core component of the moral economy of humanitarian action. A comparison with Rachel Humphris's (2017) study of house visits of child welfare workers to Roma families in the UK reveals important commonalities across geographic and institutional contexts. While Roma migrants from Eastern Europe can legally work in Britain, they lack access to social rights. Social workers assess Roma women's parenting capacity. A positive outcome might qualify them for social assistance, while a negative evaluation forces them to choose between leaving the UK and losing their children. House visits encourage specific performances of "motherhood" in accordance with welfare workers' culturally situated understanding of what being a "good British mother" entails. These visits effectively shift the UK's border from its territorial frontiers into migrants' living rooms.

House visits of welfare workers in the UK and VIVA in Mafraq both turn the home into a site where access to the services of states and transnational entities is negotiated. In the absence of tangible assessment criteria, and impaired by cultural and linguistic barriers to communication, recipients demonstrate "deservingness" through repeated performances of good refugee/migranhood. These performances extend into their family lives, as Syrians in Mafraq are also frequently addressed as *parents*, and providing them with appropriate food and toys for their children is high up on many volunteers' priority list. Finally, both encounters occur in a complex juridical environment where recipients find themselves in legal limbo as non-citizens, and are kept in doubt about their entitlements to social assistance.

Therefore, the comparison points to a global convergence of hosting-related mechanisms of social control around issues of movement. As Estella Carpi and H. Pinar Senoguz argue, hospitality turns into "a ... discursive strategy to enhance socio-spatial control" (2018: 1). It allows states and humanitarian actors to assert their rule over mobile populations by regulating

their access to social welfare and *indirect* forms of containment. After all, neither Syrian refugees in Mafraq nor Roma migrants in the UK are interned in camps. Rather, house visits oblige them to be permanently available for surprise check-ups at home, instigating new forms of containment at the urban level. Evidently, “waiting” is a constitutive element of migration governance more broadly (Andersson 2014; Mountz 2011). The temporal logic of humanitarian house visits shows that waiting not only occurs in liminal spaces, such as refugee camps and detention centers, but also in locations as mundane as refugees’ homes.

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Notes

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- ¹ To protect my informants, names of the NGO I volunteered with and the local church were changed.
2. In June 2018, an offensive of the Syrian regime against rebel-held areas in southern Syria triggered a further exodus of circa 75,000 people towards the closed Jordanian frontier. Residents from Mafraq provided food and water to those stranded at the border (Specia 2018).

3. Research ethics are discussed in more depth in my forthcoming doctoral thesis “Transnational mobilities during the Syrian war – An ethnography of rural refugees and Evangelical humanitarians in Mafraq, Jordan.” Prior to my doctoral fieldwork, my project was granted full ethical approval by the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.

4. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out that she witnessed similar practices while observing UNHCR home visits. Hence, checking on refugees’ possessions is not restricted to grassroots humanitarian action.