Syrian Refugee Faith Leaders in Lebanon: Navigating the Intersection Between Assistance Provision and 'Spiritual Activism'

Introduction

In the framework of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), there has been an increasing focus on the importance of better attuning humanitarian action to local habits, views, and practices in areas affected by a crisis, mostly identified as regions of the global South. The "localization of aid" principle encouraged international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies responding to conflict-induced displacement to involve local faith leaders originally from the areas of intervention in official humanitarian programming. Indeed, most INGOs have started viewing faith leaders as agents of change and as effective vectors of community development. INGOs tend to encourage the participation of citizen faith leaders in humanitarian and development programming in an effort to build rapid, safe, and sustainable access to local and refugee populations in need. In this context, literature on Muslim humanitarianism has been growing. While this body of literature has mostly focused on global North countries, where many faith-based organizations' (FBOs) headquarters are located (De Cordier 2009), it has more recently started to examine the global South's multi-scale responses to human displacement during and after a crisis (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011 and 2018; Thomson 2014; Ager and Ager 2015).

The recent humanitarian inclusion of faith leaders points to a growing awareness within leading humanitarian agencies of the global North that faith leaders can own, to varying degrees, social, cultural, and political capital, which can trigger self-recovery and implement better living conditions during displacement (e.g., World Vision's "Channels of Hope" on HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Gender, Maternal Newborn Child Health, and Child Protection programs in sub-Saharan African countries). Also, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) has made efforts in this direction, for example, by organizing the 2012 UNHCR convening of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Faith and Protection (Wurtz and Wilkinson 2020, 146). As a further example, in Lebanon, international partnerships with local faith leaders meant to train the latter in child protection principles began in 2017 (Wilkinson and Kraft 2020, 1). However, thus far, it has been noted (Drif 2018; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019) that international agencies are not committed enough to such partnerships in order for local populations to embrace more effective civic and political engagement via assistance provision. The "South" is rather called upon in order for the "North" to shrug off international responsibility (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018) or to coopt southern ways of working into a northern agenda in order to serve neoliberal development goals (Tomalin 2020). Practitioners themselves have indeed emphasized the risk of instrumentalizing local faith groups to build access to areas in need (GMI 2020). The dialogue itself between international secular humanitarian agencies and local faith actors may turn out to be instrumental, not giving voice to contextual visions of human progress and development: "This can result in faith groups feeling used; their values and language hijacked" (Wiles and Mallonee 2020, 21). Furthermore, policy literature still refers to "traditional" and "cultural" local practices as un-modernized and therefore problematic, revealing a colonial touch in faith-compliant development thinking (Le Roux and Bartelink 2020, 211). This enduring colonial approach, which tends to legitimize or condemn locally grown initiatives, also reveals the enduring belief that humanitarianism is western instigated by definition, and it is tacitly built on western Christian values, such as the valorization of suffering (Fassin 2012, 248). Instead, humanitarianism historically involves hybrid moral assemblages and genealogies (Mostowlansky 2019, 237).

Importantly, INGO involvement with faith leaders has been limited to the so-called host communities in countries receiving refugees. In this framework, the involvement of refugee faith leaders in relief assistance for people in need is overshadowed. The faith leaders I discuss

the experience of here do not act as intermediaries for leading humanitarian actors in the global North, a phenomenon that starts to receive scholarly attention (Kraft and Smith 2018). They, however, locate themselves at the intersection between (mostly private) donors and implementers of aid, with some of them providing services themselves. At this stage of my research, occurring in the framework of the 2017–2022 "Southern-led Responses to Displacement from Syria" project,[1] I will discuss preliminary findings based on fieldwork that I have conducted in Lebanon between 2018 and 2019, remotely in Turkey during 2019, and in Sweden during 2020. Such preliminary findings suggest that refugee religious authorities (*rijal ad-din* in Arabic, literally meaning "men of religion," or more commonly called *ulema*, "Islamic scholars," in English written literature) view transregional forms of aid and support to displaced people not only as an effective way of restoring their own socio-spiritual role outside of Syria but also as an instrument of peacebuilding and social justice among Syrian-displaced communities worldwide. In this chapter, I do not aim to highlight the resources that religious traditions and theological concepts can bring to humanitarian action and thinking, which has been an important focus for some Religion scholars (Rees and Rawson 2018, 174); I rather focus on the sociology of aiding inspired by Anzaldúa's "spiritual activism" (2015), which combines the traditional practices of spirituality with the technologies of political activism, guiding faith leaders and people in need through the process of "healing the wounds" (ibid.) of displacement. The concept of spiritual activism can convey the indigenous approaches of these refugee faith leaders to aid and support provision. While Anzaldúa referred to a spiritual dimension of the individual, which did not necessarily relate to institutional religion, the afflatus that undergirds the refugee faith leaders to assist people in need from a condition of displacement—while gatekeeping moral and religious knowledge in displaced communities —is comparable to her notion of spiritual activism: that is the need of self-growth and self-reflection to pave the way to material social justice and peace. In that sense, refugee

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faith leaders associated intimate betterment, which the condition of displacement offers as a possibility, with macro-political transformation.

Scholarly interest has followed the recent shift in emphasis from "refugee guests" to "local hosts" in the 2030 SDGs, mirroring the history of northern humanitarian priorities, which merged assistance provision for the displaced with assistance provision for vulnerable local people who receive forced migrants (OCHA 2017). As today's humanitarian crises tend to be of protracted duration with vulnerable receiving populations needing long-term support, the importance of reconsidering the development–humanitarian nexus in international humanitarian discourse and practice has come to the fore. The increasing inclusion of local citizen faith leaders into international humanitarian programming happens in this framework.

In the countries neighboring Syria, there is a growing body of literature available on faith-based and faith-inspired humanitarian action due to interest in local humanitarian responses to displacement (see Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager 2015; Ager and Ager 2015; Kraft 2016; Kraft and Smith 2018; Wagner 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2019), in the increasing involvement of faith-inspired regional aid provision, such as that funded by the Arab Gulf (Schmelter 2019), and in the so-called post-secular turn, characterizing local-international humanitarian partnerships (Tomalin 2020). In this context, scholarly interest in faith-based provision has often stemmed from approaching faith and secularism as dichotomic paradigms, where clearly defined religious and secular approaches to humanitarian action are discussed in an effort to develop more appropriate responses to protracted displacement. I will show how spiritual activism defines the refugee faith leaders' approach to assistance provision, making religion without social justice-driven endeavors redundant and making politics without religion an impossible project toward peaceful societies. I will therefore rely upon recent literature proposing a faith-focused approach as not antithetical to secularism (e.g., Ager and Ager 2015; Shakman Hurd 2017; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Lynch 2020). In particular, western-

initiated humanitarian interventions, which have approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) a ruling model, traditionally revolve around principles of neutrality and impartiality that externalize and discourage political stances and explicit social justice-driven efforts. Against this backdrop, I argue that my interlocutors instead approach aid provision as an instrument of positive peace, namely being able to achieve "cooperation for mutual and equal benefit, empathy for harmony, feeling for each other's suffering and fulfilment as parts of one's own" (Galtung 1969, 619; 2015). It is in a bid to investigate such "just" forms of humanitarianism that I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of spiritual activism. In some ways, the support networks these refugee faith leaders have managed to activate and enlarge resemble social movements, sharing principles of assistance and political purposes of justice and peace in Syria and for Syrians in exile. As some scholars have noticed (Daehnhardt 2020, 59), "social movements" worldwide have mobilized to implement different aspects of social justice while aiming to eradicate poverty and other sorts of inequality, sometimes identifying an inherent association of "social movement" with "mobilization" potential (Almeida 2019). I therefore conceptualize this form of justice-driven humanitarianism building based on combined understandings of humanitarian assistance and social justice. I also build on Robert's framing of faith-motivated philanthropy as an act of mercy, struggle for justice, and missional outreach, as it is the case for orthodox humanitarianism (Robert 2016, 59). In this vein, the assistance provided and promoted by refugee faith leaders cannot be assessed in the form of an emanation of international humanitarian programming. These refugee faith leaders are people who live among their communities in a shared condition of displacement and who desire to aid others because of their religious and social justice convictions. It is, however, emblematic how local faith leaders have instead become the object of systematic humanitarian assessments in the collaborations with international actors, as though their personal and collective mission could

count only in the form of a career and in relation to standardized modalities of care and the assessing of such care.

Although their inclusion in mainstream humanitarianism is not needed in order for faith leaders to effectively support displaced people, the trajectories, principles, and modalities of this type of assistance have been left underexplored. In this vein, I align with the scholars that have challenged ethnocentric understandings and practices of aid provision, and I try to offer examples of how aid and justice are combined in a collective project for peace by thinking outside of mainstream humanitarianism. In fact, these types of support to displaced people, which is unusual for global North-instigated aid agencies, explicitly combine social justice with the humanitarian afflatus.

Methodological Note

This research is based on one-to-one in-depth interviews I conducted over 2018 and 2019 in Lebanon, remotely in Turkey during 2019, and in Sweden during 2020. Two of the faith leaders, in fact, recently relocated to the two latter countries. These interviews were part of a broader ethnographic work carried out in Beirut, Tripoli, and in diverse rural areas in northern Lebanon among Syrian refugees and the global South's aid providers, whose refugee faith leaders are only a segment. The way I have approached the fieldwork is not a one-off data collection; I have rather endeavored to collectively build an understanding of how humanitarian assistance, faith, peace, and justice merge in the experience of displacement. In order to do so, I have continuously relied on self-accounts revolving around life anecdotes, assistance provision to displaced people from Syria, and concepts of religion, peace, and justice, which the four refugee faith leaders shared with me over the last two years.

As I will look exclusively at male faith leaders, some gender considerations are due in order to not frame religious leadership as exclusively masculine. The pool of faith leaders who

had to flee Syria is becoming populated by Syrian women too in the context of Turkey, where women have an active role in the Diyanet (Maritato 2018)—the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs, which considerably contributed to professionalizing the role of religious authorities in assistance provision. Exploring the role of refugee women in the Diyanet may therefore be a heuristic way to challenge the enduring binary opposition according to which men, including faith leaders, are rational and can act secularly in the public sphere, whereas women are irrational, religious, and emotional and, hence, unsuitable to cover official leadership roles (Bartelink and Wilson 2020, 47).

Rijal ad-Din in Syria

Large numbers of religious authorities were displaced from the present conflict in Syria, which started with a popular uprising in spring 2011. As a result of persecution, violence, and economic hardship, many of the faith leaders who were active in different geographic areas (e.g., mainly from northern and central Syria) relocated to Lebanon, Turkey and—in smaller numbers—countries further afield, such as Canada, Sweden, and Brazil. During my investigation on how refugee faith leaders engaged in assistance provision, I particularly recognized their contribution to help refugees navigate healthcare precarity and facilitate their access to sanitary facilities in the receiving countries. Although I plan to also focus on Orthodox Christian faith leaders from Syria, thus far, I have spoken to Syrian Sunni Muslims exclusively. Building on my previous research on the anthropology of crisis management in Lebanon (Carpi 2014) and the role of faith-based organizations in Lebanon's emergency crises (Carpi 2017), the role of faith leaders from Syria in providing support sheds a revealing light on the impact of faith on the politics of aiding from the condition of displacement. By this token, I am interested in examining religious leaders' modalities of assistance vis-à-vis hegemonic humanitarian thinking and practices. Most refugee faith leaders from Syria do not yet have

rights to mobility and have not achieved citizen or even legal status. This legal condition obviously implies that they are unable to become "itinerant humanitarians," as the global aid sector normally calls for (Mostowlansky 2019, 237) and celebrates.

In the early years of the conflict that followed the popular uprising, Syrian faith leaders acted as intermediaries between external donors and displaced beneficiaries or, at times, as direct providers. First, their humanitarian efforts were pursued through international funding, often coming from countries that financially supported particular factions throughout the war in Syria. Second, such faith leaders were able to capitalize on wide networks of local support and longstanding charitable activities inside Syria. The omission of Syrian faith leaders' contributions to sustainability for displaced people also obscures the longstanding history of religious charitable activities and their strong social base inside Syria, which are far older than the 2011 uprising (Pierret and Selvik 2009). Over the past five decades, under the Assad regime (1970-), Syrian Sunni authorities have been developing alternative financial support networks and mechanisms since state control weakened their independence over material resources (Pierret and Selvik 2009; Pierret 2013). Their weakening especially followed 2008 when the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqaf*) institutionally grew and started to train faith leaders. However, as confirmed by my Syrian faith leader interlocutors, only 20% of mosques in Syria are owned by the Ministry, while 80% are independent. Nevertheless, inside Syria, their sources of funding mostly came from local businessmen and merchants. The faith leaders' landscape was, however, hybrid, with some of them being able to be politically closer to the regime due to benefits gained in the mid-2000s when the Syrian government wanted to ensure their support to the regime in order to face difficult geopolitical transformations. Pierret (2014, 4) especially mentions the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Conversely, Christian associations in Syria have historically had greater leverage, benefitting from strong networks with foreign religious organizations while being connected

with international networks (Ruiz de Elvira 2015a, 134). Nonetheless, during Bashar al-Assad's mandate (2000-), the government reduced public expenses by outsourcing former state functions to local charities—where many faith leaders were involved—while keeping them under state surveillance (Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl 2014, 331). Importantly, as Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl incisively put it (2014, 335): "Under Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000), these charity organizations drew at least some active—though controlled—popular participation but, under his son's rule, Syrians increasingly felt that being a member of these institutions brought few advantages. Previously, some citizens had reported their problems to the party or to mass organizations, hoping for help in the form of subsidies, reduced taxes, etc. In the late 2000s, they turned instead to their family networks, to private organizations, including charities, or to religious leaders."

The forced migration of Sunni faith leaders outside of Syria due to war in some ways enabled them to enhance their access to diversified funders and broader transnational networks, which reshuffled the domestic hierarchy of their respective social, political, and economic capital. This marks a diverse political economy of aid provision for refugee faith leaders from different religious groups in the receiving societies. During conflict, their intervention in the field of humanitarian action was partially made possible through generous international funding, which mostly came from countries that financially supported the various rebel factions (e.g., the Arab Gulf). However, as seen, prior to the 2011 popular uprising, Syrian faith leaders had already built sizeable social networks inside and outside of Syria. Their direct participation in aid provision remains underexplored. This was especially the case with faith leaders who promoted non-violent means of survival and resilience and who were cut out of resources—in contrast to those who were compliant with the regime or with rebel armed groups—and neglected in international debates. The latter, indeed, mainly revolved around Sunni "radical Islam" or Syrian Christianity, which is depicted as indistinctively supporting the regime. Such

biased external views on faith, conflict and possibilities for dialogue impinged on the role of religion in contributing to edifying a justice-driven project. While in the first stage of the popular uprising, mosques represented safe spaces for Syrian opposition groups to gather and organize. Later, with the militarization of the opposition and governmental repression, mosques lost ground as key safe venues of mobilization and demonstration (Pierret 2012, 4), especially in the Syrian areas where my interlocutors come from.

The faith leaders I discuss here do not cast themselves as natural vectors of local needs and desires or as representatives of an entire community (Carpi 2018); they all hold a similar influence within their faith groups. All of them have an educational background in Islamic studies and have become points of call for their communities. All of them used to serve as *imams* in small-sized mosques in Syrian villages and towns. I therefore do not intend to discuss the equally important role that bigger and more influential faith leaders have played in the provision of aid and support to Syrian-displaced communities in the Middle East region and beyond. This segment of more influential faith leaders, generally managing bigger mosques in Syria, are more effective in exercising political protection and in liaising local communities with foreign state institutions and other faith or political leaders. The diversification of the faith leaders' role and influence within the broader political scenario is also key to understanding the changing face of religious leadership after the 2011 popular uprising and the human displacement which ensued. For instance, international scholars have deemed Sunni leadership to be less and less centralized (Kamrava 2018). In such a hybrid arena, Syrian faith leaders guiding smaller-scale faith communities, however, often act as effective community power brokers (Kamrava 2018, 113).

The Multifold Role of Refugee Faith Leaders

In this chapter, I focus on four Sunni refugee leaders from Syria. Their personal names will be pseudonymized, and the names of the specific places where they reside or have resided in the past omitted with the intention to protect their identities. I met Sheikh Ahmed from the village of al-Quseyr in Halba, where he was still serving as a spiritual guide in the informal tented settlement (ITS) where he and his family lived for four years. Sheikh Ahmed resettled to Sweden in 2017. Before then, he coordinated assistance provision to displaced families, especially in North Lebanon's ITS. ITS residents also used to refer to him for moral dilemmas regarding family planning as well as juridical matters. Sheikh 'Abdallah from Homs used to run an Islamic school and a medium-sized mosque in a neighborhood largely inhabited by Syrian refugees in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. The school also served as a venue where Syrians could consult with him for moral and juridical issues, which were often related to legal stays in Lebanon or resettlement. He relocated to Turkey in 2018 after he was put under pressure to shut down his Islamic school for Syrian graduates. Sheikh Radwan from Daraya (a town located in the southwest of the Syrian capital) has lived between Syria and Lebanon since 2004 and, with his wife, has managed an orphanage (*dar al-aytam*) hosting 30 to 35 children and a large-sized mosque in Central Beqaa valley's village. Local people emblematically call these children "the Sheikh's children"—*wiled ash-sheikh*. Sheikh Mohammad from Ma'arrat an-Nu'man in the Idlib countryside (Northwest Syria) relocated to Beirut in 2014 where he started working as a wall painter to secure his family's everyday livelihood but, today, he struggles to continue his spiritual and juridical mission as an Islamic scholar and thinker.

While these four faith leaders enjoy different levels of visibility in the Lebanese context and hold diverse political stances vis-à-vis a Syrian political future, the conflict, and its resolution, even though they all self-identify as opponents, they all voiced experiences of disenfranchisement. From their perspective, aid provision, in these circumstances, becomes a tool to rehabilitate their socio-spiritual role as *rijal ad-din* within displaced communities and,

more broadly, in the receiving societies. This disenfranchisement not only derives from displacement but also from the public belief that leaving their country of origin belittles individual dignity, especially the dignity of people who have responded to the will of God to offer material and moral support to people stricken by war. This belief, expressed by the Arabic saying *Man taraka darahu qallala miqdarahu*—"Who left his home forcedly lessened his value" (Zaman 2017, 165)—largely influenced their state of being outside of Syria.

Sheikh Mohammad defined the role of *rijal ad-din* in moral and material assistance provision as threefold: *fatawa* (fatwas, a religious statement that disciplines public and private behaviors); *wijaha* (contextually interpretable as moral standing); and *wasata* (intermediation). He self-identifies as an intermediary of aid, a role which he views as inherently associated with the need to gatekeep the religious message among displaced communities, confirming Kraft's study on Evangelical Churches in Lebanon (2016). In this sense, the four faith leaders all mentioned their roles as community-trusted aid and cash intermediaries. For instance, Sheikh Ahmed affirmed that he even received up to 2,000 USD from private donors to provide assistance. Faith leaders normally rely on selected networks to distribute cash for rent, food, blankets, diesel for heaters, and medications to displaced people from Syria across Lebanon and in the region. Sheikh Radwan offered his home as a shelter to a Syrian widow with two children because her tent had been hit by a storm. Social media is a frequent means of communication for refugees to reach out to faith leaders and search for their moral and material assistance.

The four sheikhs also mentioned their role as fundraisers for different causes. For example, Sheikh 'Abdallah mentioned that he helped a Syrian woman to bail out her husband, who had been detained for selling second-hand items on the local black market, from jail. Sheikh Radwan helped a Syrian couple to pay 4,100 USD for eye surgery for their 10-year-old child who risked losing her right eye after surviving shelling in the Yarmuk camp in Syria.

They all mentioned that their role as aiders is equally important to, and somehow inseparable from, their role of *irshad*: namely, providing religious, juridical, and even civic guidance to believers. Sheikh Mohammad, Sheikh Ahmed, and even Sheikh 'Abdallah, who ran the administrative affairs of a mosque in Lebanon, all referred to their religious leadership being endangered by economic and legal hardships that most refugee faith leaders are faced with. In this regard, it is worth citing the following words of Sheikh 'Abdallah:

> In theory, there are 120 faith-based organizations operating in Lebanon, but none of them is presently working due to the lack of funds. This suggests that the situation of religious actors in general is not here at the moment, not only that of refugees […]. But, of course, ours is peculiar: as a Syrian, I cannot open bank accounts in Lebanon and engage in coordinating aid as much as before. We Syrians often do unofficial religious gatherings in camps, but very rarely outside of those spaces. In camps, instead, we gather to read the Holy Qur'an, and we give *tajwid* classes […]. Religion, after all, is not seen as a basic need. In the region, there's no official commissioning (*taklif rasmi*) for religious leadership. As a Syrian, I cannot do the Friday prayer (*khotbat al jumaʿ*). The Lebanese Dar al-Fatwa no longer issues the permission of religious acknowledgement (*bittaqat taʿrif dini*) to Syrians. In the past, the Dar used to issue these cards to facilitate Syrians to apply to UNHCR as refugees, but that couldn't entitle us to carry out religious tasks here […]. I even struggle to pay my rent: how can my spiritual mission be my primary concern now? You see… forbidding us to deliver the Friday preach is an attempt to incapacitate us in Lebanon. Don't think it's any easier for us as faith leaders to resettle elsewhere: we are not five-star refugees. (Tripoli, March 21, 2018).

These words summarize the material hardships that refugee faith leaders have to cope with. Indeed, while none of them used to access wealth in Syria, they all affirmed that they used to receive a small salary for their spiritual functions either as an *imam* (worship leader in Muslim prayers), a *khatib* (public preacher), or as an Islamic sheikh sorting out family and juridical matters in their communities. The salary would mostly depend on the wealth of the village or the city and the status that their mosque historically enjoyed in the local landscape in relation to governmental politics. Two of my interlocutors in Syria used to enhance their salary by adding cleaning and administrative tasks to their service provision. Generally, they were all able to earn a salary ranging from 100 to 400 USD, which, in their villages, was enough to make ends meet. Once outside of Syria, all of them struggled to find alternative sources of income as refugees with access to a limited number of jobs in Lebanon. As a result, while their function as aid intermediaries continues to different extents, they struggle to uphold it outside of Syria. Their perspectives suggested to me that their decreased ability to mobilize assistance for Syrians in need affects their communities' trust in them as faith leaders and moral and juridical advisors.

All of them mentioned that they sought to continue offering material and moral support to displaced families in displaced Syrian communities. By using their reputation and social status, they frequently managed to seek help for people in dire need, such as financial support to pay off the house rent and surgical procedures that international humanitarian agencies do not easily address. These activities imply an unofficial and unstructured form of humanitarian work, largely occurring on an *ad-hoc* basis. This is particularly the case of Sheikh Mohammad in Beirut, who began to work in a new sector in Beirut to guarantee sustainable livelihoods for his family. The full-time job gradually prevented him from engaging in remote forms of assistance. The difficult mobility of refugees inside Lebanon also works as an impeding factor for making these networks of support viable and effective. Indeed, all of them mentioned their

inability to leave their places of residence due to the large number of security checkpoints across the country and, for three of them, the impossibility of renewing their permits of stay. Only Sheikh Ahmed, who resettled to Sweden, positively talked of his new migration as a reacquisition of his right to mobility. However, while some of his donors remained the same, his beneficiaries' networks changed as he started addressing displaced families in his new region.

In this framework, Sheikh Radwan represents an exceptional case of everyday engagement in philanthropic activities and spiritual support: "We don't need much to make things work here. It's mostly about private donations now. We just want to live in simplicity (*bedna na'iysh kaffaf*). Instead, the United Nations throw more than 35% of what they earn for administrative issues" (March 8, 2019). Sheikh Radwan mostly works by himself, but he collaborated for specific matters with Lebanese organizations, such as the Dar al-Ifta' and Amel Association, especially when he needed to refer children to healthcare facilities (some of them were disabled as a consequence of war-related causes) and to reinforce play and sport infrastructures.

The Intersectional Space of Peace, Justice, and Humanitarianism

In all of my encounters with the refugee faith leaders and in their self-accounts, peace (*as-salam*), justice (*al-'adala*), and coordination of assistance provision (*tansiq al-musa'adat*) are all recurrent ideas that capture the way in which their socio-spiritual role is reconfigured in conditions of displacement. In order to undertake such processes, the four faith leaders pointed to the need of reflection and self-growth, which their condition of displacement triggers. As contemporary humanitarian discussions revolve around conceptual nexuses to discuss the necessary intertwining of practices, such as development, humanitarian assistance, and peace, on the basis of my experience with the four refugee faith leaders, I propose a peace-justice-humanitarian nexus to capture the intersecting area in which these types of assistance emerge

and evolve. An emblematic idea of justice-driven humanitarianism, where peacebuilding is a personal approach to assistance and an intimate involvement in just politics, was advanced by Sheikh Radwan. In the Friday sermon I attended in the village's mosque in March 2019, he emphasized that the UN Charter of Human Rights echoes the importance that rights have in Islamic thinking. He also stressed the importance of peace with the non-Muslim (*as-salam ma' gheir al-muslim*) and the importance of inner and individual peace (*salam adh-dhat*), which is the base for building collective peace, while assisting people in need, to him, helps to materialize the justice project: which, as he describes it, is the first step toward moral redemption from war and governmental repression. With a different stance on the Syrian conflict and, therefore, hoping for a political future different from Sheikh Radwan's view, Sheikh Mohammad suggested a similar idea by demonstrating the importance of the "pacifist discourse" (*khitab silmi*) and of "dialogue" (*hiwar*), which are often unpopular among some of the *rijal ad-din* themselves and other segments of Syrian society: "Right now, in the Idlib countryside, there are one million people armed, keeping weapons at home, and anyone became able to do anything against each other. The armament of the protest has not led to anything constructive" (Beirut, April 12, 2019). He contended that a justice-driven interpretation of political change undergirds the act of assisting others as working collectively toward justice-based peace.

The refugee faith leaders not only sought to rehabilitate their socio-spiritual role among the displaced communities outside of Syria by continuing their moral and material assistance provision endeavors. It is often believed that many of the refugees, due to the lack of access to NGO or UN programs, end up reaching out to alternative informal support. Instead, my experience suggests that refugees often reach out to their community faith leaders first, or even to local citizen faith leaders, to guarantee access to their basis services. It emerged as evident that international assistance sometimes does not reach less known geographic areas in Lebanon,

such as Minieh-Dinniye in the north of the country, or that their response to the arrival of refugees is heavily bureaucratized and slow to the extent of encouraging the designated aid beneficiaries to look elsewhere in order to obtain support. In such cases, I observed that Lebanese faith leaders play a fundamental role in building access to services for refugees excluded from international forms of provision. While their role as aid providers and intermediaries, as abovementioned, is increasingly officialized and debated, that of Syrian refugee faith leaders in supporting their co-nationals, although important, remains invisible amidst an externally homogenized refugeehood.

Religion as a Token of Political (Dis)empowerment

Faith leaders in the Middle East traditionally carry out functions that are considered both sacred and mundane (Kamrava 2018, 98) and, to some measure, both religious and political. This hybridity is fundamental in defining the ways in which faith leaders view and approach assistance provision to displaced communities. In this respect, religious groups have defined humanitarianism as "a theological task" (Robert 2016, 59), making the latter unthinkable without the religious impetus. This impetus, however, is explicitly discussed as stemming not merely from spirituality but, to the same extent, from a desire to do justice and achieve peace in the condition of displacement and inside Syria. The idea of justice-based humanitarianism that I deduce from the faith leaders' beliefs and actions rests upon the belief that providing humanitarian assistance *must* imply a maximal stance for solidarity with the victims (Weiss 1999) and the active eradication of the politically motivated suffering of the war victim. By this token, humanitarianism is not a career or a mission that can be implemented *regardless of* politics and intimate spiritual afflatuses. In this vein, thinking assistance through the secular-religious binary emerges as misleading and heuristically sterile (Tomalin 2013; Le Roux and Loots 2017; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020).

However, assistance associated with explicit political stances has been mistrusted by international donors and also frowned upon by civil society organizations from the region and worldwide. Whether these politico-religious ways of assisting displaced people are legitimate and "West-friendly" enough or not seemed to be the primary and only topic to tackle. As I have researched in the recent past (Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020), this public mistrust toward these vernacular forms of political Islam led large segments of Syrian refugee aid providers to believe that they became disempowered *because of* their religious belonging rather than because they are refugees in a host nation-state, or because they are Syrians who drag behind an uncomfortable political history into Lebanon.

The worldview according to which social justice can be pursued to uphold a religious form of just politics is expressed by Sheikh Mohammad's belief that revolutionary participation is firstly about religious conscientization against the exploitation of religion, as operated by the Assad regime, ISIS (*Tanzim ad-Dawle*), or al-Qaeda (referring to the previously Qa'eda-offshoot *Jabhat an-Nusra*, now *Haiy'at Tahrir ash-Sham*). Indeed, Sheikh Mohammad is a victim of persecution and accusations of apostasy from the extremist groups in Syria. In Lebanon, the four faith leaders all experienced threats from political parties and from the state security services (*mukhabarat*) to quit their spiritual mission and shut down their political and religious discussion circles. For instance, Sheikh 'Abdallah tried to leave for Italy from Lebanon but, unlike Sheikh Ahmed's destiny, his application was not successful because he had to declare that he was a man of religion in Syria, "something that is definitely frowned upon" (March 28, 2018). Sheikh Mohammad worked on the establishment of the Free Scholars Association in Syria (*haiy'at al-'ulama' al-ahrar fy Suriya*), which was aimed at preventing religion from being exploited for political purposes. As Sheikh Mohammad affirmed:

> Due to heavy pressures from all sides, especially the extremist groups of my
> village—among whom, with sorrow, I could recognize many of my ex-

classmates and friends who ended up feeding the *da'eshiye* (ISIS-allied

ideological orientation), we eventually had to merge with the General

Organization of Muslim Scholars in Syria and, subsequently, with the Syrian

Islamic Council that fully supported the Turkish approach to the Syrian conflict.

In Lebanon, my security status did not change much. Repression is rampant

right now: anything can happen to you as a Syrian, for no reason. (March 30,

2019)

Sheikh Mohammad, sometime later, affirmed that "Syrians are seen in Lebanon as people who

can only do manual work as I do. In Turkey, at least, I could have started an intellectual circle"

(April 19, 2019). Due to his Islamic school activities, Sheikh 'Abdallah risked deportation

(*tasfir qahri*) to Syria in 2019 before escaping to Turkey. Unlike Sheikh 'Abdallah, Sheikh

Radwan believes that Syrian refugee faith leaders (and refugees in general) are not

disempowered and attacked in Lebanon *because* they are Syrians; it is exclusively for economic

benefits. He mentioned that the Lebanese army earns 50 USD from UNHCR to release every

Syrian who is detained because undocumented—a piece of information that I never had the

means to verify. By this token, during our visit to the local mayor, Sheikh Radwan asked me

to take a picture of the two them "as evidence of great Lebanese-Syrian good relationships in

the village." Although I was honestly surprised to witness the sway that the Syrian sheikh held

even over some of his neighbors, I realized that his endeavor to shelter and protect Syrian, and

sometimes Lebanese, children meant for the local residents keeping poverty and orphanhood

indoors, therefore making the unwanted invisible in the public space.

The lives of these refugee faith leaders are entangled in different local, governmental, and

societal politics of visibility and invisibility. Although Sheikh Mohammad and Sheikh Ahmed

decided to quit their spiritual mission to ensure their own and their families' safety, Sheikh

'Abdallah was temporarily able to emerge as a fundamental point of call for Syrian Sunni

communities in Tripoli, running an Islamic school for Syrian graduates. His visibility, however, exposed him to major risks and eventually forced him out of the country. Sheikh Radwan instead affirmed that his own politics of visibility changed throughout the years he spent in the Beqaa village. While, in the first instance, he tried to make his orphanage visible on social media in order to raise funding, he later opted to invisibilize his activities in order to protect the children and the resources he manages to collect. For example, he mentioned that when he decided to post pictures of some of the children for his fundraising campaigns, his Facebook account was hacked. The hacker raised money for the orphanage by using the pictures of the children, stating that the sheikh was unable to provide food to them and that the mosque was in the middle of nowhere. Instead, the mosque is located on the main road cutting across the Beqaa valley with several shops all around. The risks of making his activity public caused Sheikh Radwan to only rely on funding from his networks, such as his family in Turkey and donations from private individuals in Lebanon and in the region.

In line with scholars who warned against a tacit marginalization and de-visibilization of religion from the public humanitarian arena (Ager and Ager 2015), these are also self-initiated processes that refugees undertake as the only possible instrument of individual and collective protection (Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) or as the only viable way of gaining and preserving international support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). In the cases discussed, the invisibilization of religion appears as a modality of refugee governance that is meant to disempower refugees in host states, especially from a political perspective. As a result, all attempts to make religious assistance visible ended up being jeopardized, and they limited the faith leaders' possibility of providing assistance to displaced Syrian communities.

Conclusion

Although Christian organizations were overrepresented in the Syrian associative landscape, especially in the 1980s and 1990s (Ruiz de Elvira 2015b, 109)—and some of them used to benefit from the economic and human support of INGOs and UN agencies (Ruiz de Elvira 2015b, 103)—Sunni charities in Syria found themselves needing to look elsewhere to receive support. Likewise, the Sunni faith leaders I crossed paths with suffered from a longstanding lack of material resources and saw their access to external support networks discouraged by governmental measures. If relevance and flexibility were mentioned as the key challenges that Syrian faith leaders need to face (Pierret 2013, 239), they are the assets that refugee faith leaders, as displaced aid providers, think they are about to lose.

Spiritual activism, in this context, combines religious ethics with the political project of implementing social justice in post-war Syria and displaced communities; both the religious and the political impetuses, as expressed by the faith leaders, encourage the individual to "take the suffering of others into the life of the self" (Rowlands 2017 in Rees and Rawson 2018, 183). Yet, several Syria pundits and commentators refrain from giving voice to faith leaders, especially those from Sunni communities that now live in exile because both the international community and local populations tend to frame religion and religious leadership as the very etiology underlying conflict in Syria, as often happens worldwide (Pherali 2016). My research has built on the belief that "focusing on the actual and potential roles of religion in promoting social justice does not entail dismissing the severity of the persecution, violence and discrimination that people experience on religious grounds, whether in countries of origin, in countries of first asylum or in countries of transit or of resettlement" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2020, 4).

On the one hand, religiously motivated acts of assistance, meant to collaboratively pave the way to justice and peace, can reinforce social struggles against structural hardships, such as poverty and lack of access to basic services. On the other hand, the identity, experience, and

the capacities for justice and for peace of refugee faith leadership risk fading away with their desire to bring moral and material rehabilitation into the life of the displaced. In this chapter, I have pointed to the importance of exploring this emerging intersectional space of peace, justice, and humanitarian assistance by using indigenous epistemological tools, rather than venturing into tiring judgments on whether politics and religion can get along well in the semantics of humanitarianism.

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