



# **Critique of the Humanitarian Aid System: Social Solidarity and Alternative Approaches to Refugees and Displacement**

Raed Eshnaiwer



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# Critique of the Humanitarian Aid System: Social Solidarity and Alternative Approaches to Refugees and Displacement

Raed Eshnaiwer

Center for Development Studies Birzeit University, Palestine<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents some critiques on the international humanitarian aid system, its practices and methods in the contexts of forced migration. It examines how the aid system and international organisations may exacerbate the vulnerability of refugees and local communities through the different controlling mechanisms applied to aid recipients, rather than improving their precarious situation, ensuring their dignity and protecting them from states' violations of their rights. The paper also discusses solidarity, particularly social solidarity, as one of the complementary/supportive societal approaches to deal with refugee issues. However, it does not propose considering solidarity as a fully-fledged alternative approach to the aid system, since neither can fully replace the other.

## KEYWORDS

Humanitarian aid, solidarity, refugees, host community, international organisations.

## Introduction

Literature on the international refugee humanitarian aid system focuses on three main components of that system: states (donor and host states), international organisations, and individuals (refugees/ aid recipients), which interact through a set of norms and values that govern the structure of the aid system. While states initially shape and construct these values and norms based on their different political, economic, cultural and humanitarian interests, international organisations play the role of mediator between states and refugees, who have no say in the whole aid system. Thus, we can draw a linear relationship between the three components, with aid moving vertically, with the state, particularly donor states, on top of the pyramid, down to organisations and then individuals. This understanding of the aid system, however, ignores local actors who are important in any refugee crisis, such as host communities and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). Therefore, it misses the

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<sup>1</sup> **Contact** Raed Eshnaiwer ✉ [reshnaiwer@gmail.com](mailto:reshnaiwer@gmail.com)

phenomena emerging out of the interaction between refugees, local organisations and host communities, and the impact of these phenomena on the humanitarian aid system.

This paper presents some critiques of the international humanitarian aid system, its practices and methods, in the contexts of forced migration, without touching on the history and development of that system. It examines how the aid system and international organisations may exacerbate the vulnerability of refugees and local communities through the different controlling mechanisms applied to aid recipients, rather than improving their precarious situation, ensuring their dignity, and protecting them from states' violations of their rights. Thus, the humanitarian aid system, in that sense, Hyndman argues, provides neither protection nor solutions to displacement (2000, 4). The paper also discusses solidarity, particularly social solidarity, as one of the complementary/supportive societal approaches to deal with refugee issues. However, it does not propose considering solidarity as a fully-fledged alternative approach to the aid system, since neither can fully replace the other.

Social solidarity is distinguished here from other types of solidarity, particularly international solidarity, the basis of which at a certain point was considered a white privilege that defines the entire solidarity process (Tabar 2016b). It also differs from institutional solidarity, which consolidates dependency on international assistance. For the purpose of this paper, social solidarity is defined as a societal phenomenon of support, cooperation and sympathy between the different communities and individuals, based on social and familial relations, informal (sometimes formal) networks and initiatives, which might develop into an institutional form of support by CBOs and local organisations. Social solidarity is considered here as a collective action, more than an individual activity. The sense of social solidarity between communities increases in times of crisis, particularly when states fail to provide protection and support for people (citizens and noncitizens).<sup>2</sup>

### **Humanitarian aid: Victimhood and the dignity of refugees**

International humanitarian aid organisations treat refugees and IDPs as passive victims that need life-saving assistance in the first place, rather than targeting them as active agents with legal, political and social rights that must be preserved, which reflects a donor-driven approach rather than a rights-based one (Harrell-bond 2002; Walkup 1997; Slim 2002). Therefore, images and demonstrations of the passivity and innocence of refugees are important for compassion and receiving aid from these organisations. Literature on refugees and forced migration presents two contradictory images for refugees as seen by international organisations: those of good and bad refugees. While human beings build their perceptions about these concepts based on moral norms or social interactions, the perception of the good and bad for international humanitarian organisations dealing with

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<sup>2</sup> The paper will give some examples from Lebanon on how the different communities (citizens and refugees) act in solidarity in times of crises.

refugees is based on the 'deservability' of these refugees for international aid. The criteria of the good refugee for these organisations, according to Harrell-bond, are those of the weak, silent, helpless and vulnerable victim, meanwhile the bad refugee is thankless, cheating, aggressive, manipulative and dangerous, who constitutes a threat to the aid system (Harrell-bond 2002, 57-58). The image of the good refugee can be used as a convincing justification by humanitarian organisations to get funds from donor states and to appeal to Western sympathy. This combination of ambivalent images (good-bad) of the refugee facilitates the imposition of anti-refugee securitisation by the host state, and the depriving of refugees of their political and legal rights, thus violating refugee rights.

The 'good-bad' dyad governs refugees' entitlement to international aid and compassion; thus, refugees must be good, innocent, and passive victims, in order not to be denied this help. At a certain level, this victimhood becomes the main (and maybe the only) criterion for refugees to qualify for aid; many refugees were excluded from the aid system based on their 'poor' and unconvincing performance as victims who deserve aid.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the rule becomes: the more of an innocent victim you are, the more entitlements for aid and compassion you have. In the words of Ilana Feldman, "if [the oppressed] do not appear 'innocent' enough or if they otherwise do not conform to the narrative demands of this category they are denied the compassion and aid." (Cited in Tabar 2016, 24).

Playing the role of the poor victim is an issue that has harmed refugee dignity as human beings, and which can hardly be restored: some Syrian refugees interviewed in Jordan frequently said that "UNHCR transformed us into beggars for aid from the organisation; look at the queues of Syrian refugees at the agency's door, it is very humiliating how refugees are treated."<sup>4</sup> Dignity, as Menke argues, is a base from which human rights are derived; it is, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "the right to have rights" (Menke 2014, 337). Therefore, if war and forced displacement create victims in the first place, humanitarian aid confirms this victimisation, divests refugees of their dignity, deepens their subordination and dependence, and reproduces them as persons in need of charity and philanthropy. To satisfy the criteria of the international aid system, refugees have to reproduce themselves as 'good' victims, even if this harms their dignity and values.

What is needed to re-humanise humanitarian aid in a way that de-victimises refugees and protects their dignity? Harrell-bond proposes a "rights-based humanitarianism that goes

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<sup>3</sup> A report by Saferworld and The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) argues that the so called 'vulnerability assessments' that international agencies undertakes to select vulnerable refugees for aid, and the ambiguity around who is considered vulnerable, usually cause some tensions between refugees themselves on the one hand, and refugees and host communities on the other (Saferworld and LCPS 2018, 20).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with M.S., a Syrian refugee in Jordan. The metaphor of 'beggars' was frequently used by Syrian refugees in Jordan when they talk about their relations with humanitarian aid organisations, particularly UNHCR, and its policy in the aid distribution, or when they talk about themselves as refugees. H.M, a Syrian refugee from Syria in Jordan said that "I don't like the idea of seeking asylum. The refugee status causes allergy for me. I registered with the UNHCR two years after my arrival to Jordan, not for the sake of assistance, but to facilitate issuing some documents from the state. I am a refugee I confess, but I hate this status, I am not a beggar, I can work and produce." (Interviewed in 12/7/2016).



beyond private charity and governmental largess.” (Harrell-Bond 2002, 52). This rights-based approach should guarantee refugee rights, not as passive victims but as agents with dignity, capacities and strength. UNHCR attempts to adopt a new mechanism called “community-based approach” to guide its interventions with refugee communities, which entails partnership with people of concern during the different stages of UNHCR's projects. Such an approach, according to UNHCR, aims at reinforcing the dignity, human rights and self-esteem of people of concern through enhancing their participation in the decision-making processes and activities that affect their lives,<sup>5</sup> which makes it compatible with a rights-based approach. Major shortcomings of the community-based approach, as applied by international humanitarian organisations in refugee and displacement contexts, spring from the level of meaningful participation allowed for these refugees, particularly if their demands and orientations contradict the interests of the organisation, the host country, or the donors. Calhoun argues that it is also sometimes difficult to create a meaningful participation with the reality of institutional rationalisation, bureaucratisation and professionalisation, which create new patterns of “managerial orientation and governmentality” (Calhoun 2008, 77), that hinder any real engagement in decision making for refugees.<sup>6</sup>

### **Containment, securitisation and control**

Forced migrants were often described as a security threat by most of the host states in the world, particularly at the end of the cold war and in the post September 11 period. One of the main claims is that the presence of refugees, especially in large numbers, has negative repercussions on the socio-economic life, cultural, religious, and demographic identity of host societies. Media and often policy makers connect the term 'refugee' with terrorism, and the war against terrorism was connected in some European countries with the fight against illegal migration (Human Rights Watch 2001, 5). This statist demonisation and securitisation of refugees led, in some cases, to the emergence of anti-refugee discourse on societal level, where refugees are depicted as the cause of all troubles in their host countries.

Moreover, states take some measures to reduce the ‘threat’ posed by refugees to their citizens. Huysmans explains how states distance refugees from the host society through “administering the inclusion and exclusion processes,” denying entry for some refugees, imprisoning some of them in detention centres, deporting some of them, and following harsh security measures to deter future refugees from coming to the country (2006, 55-7). This paper argues, as Hammerstad (2011) rightly does, that some of the refugee humanitarian aid organisations, are actively involved in the process of refugee securitisation (depicting

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR. (No date). *The Context, Concept and Guiding Principles*. Retrieved January 11, 2021 from <https://www.unhcr.org/47f0a6712.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Rationalization includes “developing standardized codes of conduct, accountability mechanisms, methodologies for calculating the consequences of their actions, abstract rules to guide standardized responses, and procedures to improve efficiency and identify the best means to achieve specified ends.” Bureaucratization includes “developing specialized knowledge, spheres of competence, divisions of labor and areas of specialization, and rules for determining the optimal means for given situation” (Barnett 2008, 254).

refugees as a security threat). Such securitisation assists the state in formulating new policies that constrain the freedom of refugees and contain them, rather than assisting them. Moreover, the literature shows that international aid might be a source of tension between refugees and host communities, due to the non-transparent distribution and allocation of aid, which elevates the level of insecurity for refugees. Therefore, there is a need for more transparency and accountability<sup>7</sup> in aid distribution (Saferworld, LCPS 2018, 3).

Hyndman critically examines the discourse of humanitarian action, particularly the idea of Preventive [preemptive] Protection<sup>8</sup>, which, according to him, is “a spatialized strategy of assisting displaced persons within countries at war rather than as refugees in countries nearby.” He argues that this strategy is an attempt to contain the ‘would-be refugees’ and to avoid international legal obligations towards them (2000, 2). This makes humanitarian action, in the case of forced migration, a strategy of containment aimed at curbing refugees by keeping them as internally displaced persons in the country of origin through establishing safe/preventive zones, that sometimes are less than safe. Thus, humanitarianism is, in certain cases, correlated with a decline in the protection of refugees.

Preventive protection also includes refugees in the country of first asylum who succeed in crossing international borders and leave their country of origin. These refugees-to-be receive humanitarian aid that aims at finding them solutions in the region of origin rather than heading to the Western countries, which are the main donors of refugee organisations. It is therefore argued that humanitarian aid is an instrument of foreign policy for donor states (Calhoun 2010, 51), mainly European ones, implemented by international organisations through which rich countries in the ‘North’ influence other poorer countries in the ‘South’, a process that reflects power relations in the field of humanitarian aid. Therefore, humanitarian action, according to Calhoun, “has a managerial orientation, minimizing the threats that displaced populations pose to the otherwise smooth operation of global economies” (Calhoun 2010, 41). This may partially explain why 85% of the world's refugees are hosted in the regions of origin (16.9 million people), and the least developed countries provided asylum to one third (6.7 million) of the global total of refugees (UNHCR 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Encampment policy is another example of how humanitarian assistance is used to contain refugees in the country of first asylum. Turner argues that this policy has two main goals; first, it controls the movements of refugees in the host country through guarding the entrances of the camp (by the police of the host state) and regulating who gets in and out. Second, this encampment policy limits refugee participation in the market of the host country to prevent

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<sup>7</sup> Upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to people.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR defines Preventive Protection as “the establishment or undertaking of specific activities inside the country of origin so that people no longer feel compelled to cross borders in search of protection and assistance.” In this sense, for instance, action on behalf of the internally displaced can be defined as preventive protection, although the primary motive may be to address a genuine gap in protection rather than to avert outflow. Preventive protection in this sense may also include the establishment of ‘safety zones’ or ‘safe areas’ inside the country of origin where protection may be sought. It relates therefore to the protection of nationals in their own country (mentioned in Hyndman 2000 17-8).

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>

competition for job opportunities (Turner 2015, 394). In many cases, UNHCR is the body that establishes, administers and runs the camps, which makes the agency complicit with states in detaining refugees. Instead of calling for more freedom of movement for refugees, UNHCR agreed on policing measures in administering refugees' camps and limiting the freedom of refugee movement. The following long quotation by a UN security advisor in Amman, Jordan, clearly reveals how the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan was established to control refugees rather than assist them (UN field security adviser, 2015, mentioned in Hoffmann 2017, 106):

*Azraq [refugee camp] was... designed to offer a better way of controlling a potentially unruly population, both within and outside the camp. The experience of Zaatari Camp – which during the first year of its existence had seen regular violent riots, including attacks on Jordanian security personnel – served as a lesson learned. The proximity of Zaatari Camp to the nearby town of Zaatari had created problems, as disgruntled locals, seeking employment in the camp, clashed with the police. ... [T]he location of Azraq is one of the good things here... We are 35 kilometers from the nearest towns on both sides, so there is no direct contact between the refugees and the locals... Each village [in the camp] is divided into blocks, and each block can be quickly isolated by the police... This has helped us, and we have not had any security incidents since 2014... In Zaatari, the narrow roads had created a 'trap' for security personnel. Azraq's vastness served as another risk-mitigation device: Here, we built the base camp [where aid agencies' offices are located] at 8 kilometers from the nearest village – so if the refugees start a demonstration, they will need one and a half hours walking to get to the base camp!*

Another controlling mechanism that the state and the international organisations use is biometric registration technology (Iris Scan).<sup>10</sup> In the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan, the mechanism starts with the refugees' registration process; both the government and UNHCR do their own iris scan for Syrian refugees who would like to enter the country. At a later stage, the system was developed and adopted by refugee humanitarian organisations (UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF) as the main way for refugees to have access to cash grants, enabling them to withdraw money from cash-points, accessing their aid system, buying from supermarkets.<sup>11</sup> The UNHCR representative in Jordan, Andrew Harper, said that the system "is probably the most effective and efficient assistance programme anywhere in the world. Refugees use their irises as a form of identification, so this makes it fraud proof." He also claims that the system ameliorates the provision of assistance for refugees (no identities and no documents needed), and reinforces their dignity, since they no longer have to go to the UNHCR's office and line up to receive their cash assistance.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The technology has been deployed by UNHCR as a pilot project in the Afghan-Pakistan borderland since 2002 and in the refugee camps in Kenya since 2007, see Jacobsen 2015, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Refugees inside the Azraq camp in Jordan, wanting to buy from the only one supermarket in the camp, don't use money, they instead use the iris scanning system, which reads the details of the refugee from their eye-print, and deducts the grocery bill from their monthly allowances, see also Staton 2016 and Dunmore 2015.



Although the iris scan technology is justified for humanitarian purposes, the danger of such a system lies in the possibility of data being accessed by unauthorised actors. There is the risk that data might be used for intelligence purposes, or to track refugees, mainly by the host countries with which UNHCR might cooperate and share information. Such usage of refugee data extends the reach of state power into new domains of refugee life and makes refugees, as Jacobsen argues, in need of another level of protection from those who access their data. (2015, 73; 2017).

In fact, the whole idea of iris scanning is not far from UNHCR officials' behaviour towards refugees, which is characterised by "defensiveness and mistrust." (Mentioned by Mauro de Lorenzo at Harrellbond 2002, 70). Some humanitarian aid workers depict refugees as a threat to the aid system, through their attempts to manipulate the system in order to get larger shares of the assistance, which necessitates a protection for that system rather than a protection for the refugees themselves. Thus, refugees, as Walkup notes, become the problem, instead of being people with problems. (Mentioned in Harrell-Bond 2002, 73). Such an approach in dealing with refugees, Hyndman argues, converts refugees into people under suspicion and produces an "untrustworthy and inferior other, and legitimises a full complement of surveillance and disciplinary practices" (Hyndman 2000, 25). Therefore, refugees in humanitarian intervention practices are considered as dangerous subjects, that pose dilemmas for the international community, and threats to the international aid system.

### **Political versus charitable aid**

Legal instruments and conventions (regional and international) are not clear when it comes to the political rights of refugees in the host countries; it is considered an internal issue for the state whether to grant or withhold some political rights for these groups. For example, the 1951 convention, Mandal argues, does not deal with the political rights of refugees in the host states; therefore, they are supposed to be granted the same political rights as other aliens, based on the internal laws of the host states. (Mandal 2003). This treatment as aliens, however, is governed by different factors, such as the relationship between the host and home countries, the relations between refugees and the government of the host state, the level of welcome of the host society, the economic situation in the host state, and the level of politicisation of refugees. Security is the main concern behind depriving refugees of political rights in the host countries; states preemptively suppose that political rights may encourage refugees to engage in subversive activities, mainly against their home country, which might create tension on the regional level. Therefore, some legal instruments<sup>12</sup> stress that refugees must not take part in any subversive activities against any state, a provision that is usually used to deprive refugees of political rights.

Humanitarian organisations do not advocate for refugee political rights, they rather comply with the sovereignty of the host state. Thus, these organisations abide by

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<sup>12</sup> Like the 1969 OAU convention and some MoUs between UNHCR and states.

'independence', which is the main principle in humanitarian action (along with humanity, impartiality and neutrality). Independence designates the autonomy of humanitarian work from political or other objectives, which makes humanitarian aid a process of mere charity and pity toward refugees of the Global South without a political dimension, the recipients of which should be politically passive. The absence of explicit or even implicit political support, Slim argues, leads to the continuation and exacerbation of an inhumane political status quo, (Slim 2002, 2-5) that suppresses rather than assists refugees and prevents them from attaining their natural rights. Thus, humanitarianism responds to refugee needs by insisting on what Calhoun calls "pre-political charity," which, according to Tabar, seeks to "alleviate suffering through narrow material aid that keeps power structures intact and is thus anti-political in its effects." (Tabar 2016, 18).

### **Localisation of humanitarian action<sup>13</sup>**

Local actors (CBOs; Local NGOs and LNGOs; Faith-Based Organisations; and host communities) are the first respondents to the different (internal and external) displacement crises. The knowledge they have about the culture, area and population, and the techniques they apply in assisting people throughout crises make them important actors in the humanitarian aid system. Moreover, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that LNGOs have higher potential for "resilience-building and long-term development due to their long-term presence in the affected areas." (mentioned in Bruschini-Chaumet et al 2019, 11). However, the power asymmetry that the humanitarian aid system is subjected to determines the nature of the relations between the different actors in the system. This asymmetry, Bruschini-Chaumet et al argue, situates local actors in an inferior position to international ones, which makes localisation incomplete and superficial (2019, 12). In 2016, UNHCR made a commitment to empowering national and local humanitarian actors (UNHCR 2021), particularly in conflicting areas. That commitment was one of the outputs of the Grand Bargain agreement signed by the main actors in the international humanitarian system, who agreed on the localisation of humanitarian aid.

Dixon et al argue that the commitment to empower local and national actors was based on two main assumptions; the first relates to the cultural, political and linguistic knowledge that locals have regarding the targeted area and population, which enables them to better manage the humanitarian missions and negotiate with the various conflicting actors. The second assumption has a security dimension and comes as a result of the violence against aid workers and the high levels of insecurity in certain areas. Therefore, international organisations rely on locals who, according to these organisations, are considered to be less exposed to risk than the internationals, an assumption which is not true. (2016, 113-4). A

<sup>13</sup> "The localisation of aid refers to a shift in tasks, power, and funding from large international actors and donors to national and local responders" (Bruschini-Chaumet et al 2019, 10). We can argue here that localisation must entail partnership between international and local actors that includes decision-making, planning and implementing of the humanitarian action. Without such partnership, localisation remains incomplete.

financial factor might also justify the tendency towards localisation; the huge salary difference between local and international staff makes localisation a frugal alternative, which reduces some financial burdens.

Local actors are sometimes “approached as a risk to be managed” (Dixon et.al 2016, 115) rather than as equal partners in humanitarian action, making this a process of remote management rather than one of localisation. This attitude of INGOs towards local partners as a threat to the humanitarian aid system is similar to the attitude towards refugees themselves, who are depicted as a threat to the aid system (see above). Therefore, INGOs place many regulations on the LNGOs to guarantee commitment to their standards, which hinders aid provision for communities in need. In the case of humanitarian aid in Syria, for example, around 75% of all official assistance is being delivered in the country by LNGOs, due to these actors’ capacity to access affected populations. In spite of LNGOs ability to access these communities, many INGOs resist dealing with them due to issues of mistrust. (2016, 114).

Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), often local organisations, play instrumental roles in assisting refugees and IDPs in the host countries. Some FBOs are funded by international and regional organisations, while others receive donations from the local population. UNHCR adopted the religious working mechanisms of some FBOs to assist refugees; it developed the Refugee Zakat Fund, which receives the Zakat and *Sadaqah* donations from Muslims around the world and distributes them to refugees. In 2019, the fund received 38.1 million USD from Zakat donors around the world, which assisted 111,209 refugee families. It was selected as the best platform for distributing the Zakat donations for refugees.<sup>14</sup> This work can’t be done without the assistance and support of the trusted local FBOs, which encourage Zakat payers to pay their Zakat to that fund.

## **Solidarity as a supportive system**

Literature on solidarity provides various definitions of the concept of ‘solidarity’, all of which focus on how groups organise their collective action in order to improve certain situations. Hechter, for example, defines it as a nascent feature of groups that facilitates collective action and social order (Hechter, 2001). Others define it as bonding, or as bridging relationships between different people (Abela 2004; de Beer and Koster 2009), or as feelings of sympathy and responsibility for other people (Janmaat and Brown 2009). However, using these definitions without investigating their applicability to the context of the case study might be problematic, particularly when studying solidarity in the Arab world since the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests in 2011. Therefore, one might raise some methodological questions here, such as: Who defines solidarity? Is there a global definition for the concept

<sup>14</sup> Check the Refugee Zakat fund via this website: [Zakat Funds | زكّاتي للاجئين | Zakat for Refugees \(https://zakat.unhcr.org/en\)](https://zakat.unhcr.org/en).

that fits all contexts? Can we define solidarity apart from the cultural, historical, spatial and social contexts of the case study?

Hechter (2015) mentions three theoretical perspectives on the emergence of solidarity in general. In the normative view, solidarity is more likely to develop among individuals who share fundamental values, such as those seen in religious or ethnic groups (Parsons, 1951). Socialisation here is the key to the attainment of solidarity and emerge in socially homogenous solidary groups. In the structuralist view, solidarity arises from the virtue of the sharing of common interests within social classes. Thus, members of solidary groups are formed by sharing interests and by their repeated interactions that increase awareness of the threat from the powerful antagonists (Coser, 1956; Collins and Sanderson, 2009). In the rational choice view, solidarity is considered as a function of dependence on the group and control mechanisms to ensure compliance with its rules and obligations.

These theoretical perspectives do not fully explain solidarity in cases of displacement, either between refugees themselves or between refugees and host communities. Hobbs and Souter (2019), highlight three main forms of solidarity with refugees and asylum-seekers from conflict zones. Cosmopolitan solidarity is solidarity based on the protection of the essential human rights of refugees. Nationalist solidarity focuses on the 'safety' of the nation and solidarity with its people, thereby often requiring the exclusion of refugees for this purpose. A third form of solidarity is affinity-based solidarity, which is a middle ground between both cosmopolitan and nationalist solidarity, in which refugee status is granted to refugees who share certain cultural, racial, linguistic or religious characteristics with the country in which they are seeking asylum.

The paper mentioned earlier that in situations of forced displacement (refugee and IDP cases) communal and CBOs' responses, normally precede institutional responses of the international aid organisations, which usually come too late after many refugees get assisted by local communities "to develop their own strategies for surviving within the local economy" (Harrell-Bond et.al 1992, 210). Although both responses, communal and institutional, initially focus on short-term emergency humanitarian aid to refugees, without addressing long-term issues, reliance on institutional (centralised, bureaucratic) response creates a dependency culture; meanwhile, the communal response creates a solidaristic one.

Host communities, neighbours, families and friends (not international aid workers) are the main sources of care, assistance and solidarity provided for refugees (Calhoun 2010, 55). Moreover, social factors (particularly friendships and familial relations) play a central role in refugees' choice of their destinations, either in the region of origin or in one of the Northern countries, which reflects refugees' reliance on social rather than institutional networks in the first place. These factors constitute the main source of solidarity between refugees and host communities. Refugees target relatives or friends in the host countries, who may assist them briefly until they establish their strategies of survival. A.Z, a Syrian refugee interviewed in Irbid, North of Jordan, mentioned that as one of the main reasons for choosing Jordan as a

first destination: “we came to Jordan to visit our cousins in the first place, we have a family here, and we are not refugees.”<sup>15</sup> (Interviewed in 27/6/2016). Refugees assert the importance of the familial identities that gather them with people of the same family (not necessarily relatives) in the different neighbouring countries. In that case, familial relations become a main source of interpersonal trust and a generator of solidarity. Moreover, these relations play a role in reconstructing the pre-displacement social capital<sup>16</sup>, a main source of solidarity, which gives importance to the citizens’ morale and civic engagement (Juul, 2013).

## The case of Lebanon

Examining the case of Lebanon in particular, given the large influx of Syrian refugees into the country, we can observe three main types of solidarity enacted on the ground. First is inter-refugee solidarity,<sup>17</sup> or what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh refers to as refugee-refugee humanitarianism (cited in Sharif 2018); this solidarity occurs between different refugees, often based on their status as refugees, such as solidarity between Palestinian and Syrian refugees, or based on their mutual affinity of being Syrian (Syrian-Syrian refugee solidarity). This type of solidarity is usually motivated by a shared struggle against an oppressing force, and serves the advantage of altering the image of refugees from passive victims to active agents who are capable of taking part in the change process towards their liberalisation from the forces that are oppressing them. In fact, both Sharif (2018) and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh build on this through their examination of refugee-to-refugee solidarity cases. Whereas Sharif focuses on the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, specifically Palestinian Syrian refugees from Shatilla camp in their support for Syrian refugees following the war, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016) provides several cases, the Palestinian refugee case in Lebanon being one of them. Specifically, Sharif adds that refugee-refugee solidarity often seeks to cover the gap in humanitarian aid, which frequently fails to address the needs of refugees. Giving details on this form of solidarity, she notes that Palestinians in Shatilla camp opened up their mosques to host homeless Syrian refugees, donated clothes, blankets, food baskets and other resources. Despite these positive trends amongst refugee communities, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh warns that even within refugee-to-refugee solidarity actions, there are still rising tensions due to increased competition over scarce space and resources. To ensure the continuation of refugee-to-refugee solidarity, tensions have to be effectively controlled; this implies that host countries must ensure that support to refugees is well-targeted and does not cause the

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Syrian refugee in Irbid, Jordan, on June 26, 2016. The interview was not recorded at request of the interviewee.

<sup>16</sup> Social capital is defined as capital that has accumulated in the long term through relationships and networks built between individuals and groups, based on their level of social trust and mutual values and attitudes (SCPR 2017).

<sup>17</sup> To some extent, this type of solidarity resembles Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity, which arises in groups that include people bonded by similar backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Refugees in host countries share some similar values and backgrounds, particularly as victims of displacement from their home countries.



exclusion of one community over the other. Social capital that refugees bring with them and start to reform in the host countries plays an important role in this inter-refugee solidarity.

Another form of solidarity that can be witnessed in Lebanon is the solidarity given by host communities to Syrian refugees. This form of solidarity explains the resilience of the host communities, which partially explains how fragile states like Lebanon and Jordan were able to shoulder the burden of all those influxes of refugees. This form of solidarity has social (familial, friendship, kinship), legal, humanitarian, political and economic components. A research paper published by Safe World and The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (2018) on Syrian refugees in Lebanon notes that solidarity between Lebanese locals and Syrian refugees manifested itself in the welcoming of refugees into the hosts' homes at the onset of the crisis. It also argues that bridges of solidarity and understanding can be rebuilt by bringing Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities together especially in areas where interaction is limited. (2018, 3). This is confirmed by Cherri et. al (2016), arguing that Lebanese communities provided shelter and other support to Syrians when the crisis first started; yet, with the prolonged duration of the crisis, these solidarities were eventually replaced by rising tensions between Lebanese locals and Syrian refugees due to the misconception that refugees were placing a heavy strain on the Lebanese economy. In Turkey, similarly, Betts et. al (2018) cite the forms of solidarity extended to refugees from local communities in Izmir; locals provided shelter, food and other needs to Syrian refugees. Yet, the authors cited that in many cases, solidarity extended to refugees was identity-based, in terms of which a selective-solidarity approach was often adopted by Turkish municipalities, through which they provided services to refugees with whom they share common characteristics. This is similar to what Hobbs and Souter (2019) refer to as affinity-based solidarity.

Finally, a third type of solidarity can be observed; that is, refugee-to-host-communities solidarity. Specifically, it refers to instances in which refugees sometimes act in solidarity with host communities. This can be through: (i) active solidarity, such as the solidarity actions of Palestinian and Syrian refugees towards some Lebanese people and neighbourhoods after the blast in Beirut port; (ii) the provision of assistance for Lebanese/Jordanian neighbours; (iii) or a more passive form of solidarity, through sharing empathy with host communities (although, it is important to note that this is not a common form of solidarity, and might be difficult to test).

Hanafi argues that 'neighbourliness' is an important element that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are searching for; therefore, some of them move from concrete apartments in areas such as Tanayel and Aarsal, to tents in the camps in Bakaa, where they find good neighbourliness and social proximity. Loneliness, lack of interaction and lack of conviviality (*mu'alafa*) are among the main determinants that lead refugees to settle in one place or another. (Hanafi 2022, 14). Therefore many refugees in the Arab region settle where they have good neighbours, either their relatives or not, which is important for the development of solidarity among refugees and non-refugees. This search for good neighbours is part of the Arab culture, particularly in rural areas, where they say "choose your neighbour before

you choose your house" (*al-Jar qabel al-Dar*). However, it, neighbourliness, dissolves in cities, where people have neither the time nor the interest in getting to know their neighbours.

## Conclusion

Exploratory fieldwork conducted by the team of the Know-War project in six different localities<sup>18</sup> in Lebanon showed that after 10 years of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, social solidarity does exist within and between the different communities (Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian). Some interviewees used the 'family' metaphor to express how the communities in some of these localities assist each other much as do family members. Some people, however, expressed the view that the deteriorated economic and political situations in Lebanon, the explosion in the Port of Beirut and the COVID19 pandemic had negatively affected solidarity between the different communities, which damaged the social interaction between them. Some interviewees considered international funding and the donors' biased conditions as factors that reduce solidarity. Meanwhile, they considered collective work, awareness, and joint youth activities and initiatives as factors that foster solidarity.

This solidarity, I believe, has to be institutionalised in a way that doesn't reproduce the power asymmetries between different actors in the humanitarian action system. Local actors in host countries can take the lead in this institutionalisation process, where they have been working in partnership with international and regional actors since the beginning of the humanitarian action missions in the host countries and get involved in the decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation processes. This localisation, which is based on real partnership with the local actors, might be the first step towards a structural change in the humanitarian aid system, one that establishes a new era in that system.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my special thanks to the Center for Development Studies, especially Dr. Linda Tabar and Haneen Zaqout for their help. I would also like to thank the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and the project *KnowWar (Knowledge Production in Times of Flight and War – Developing Common Grounds for Research in/on Syria)*.

## Notes on the contributor

**Raed Eshnaiwer** is a researcher at the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University (BZU). He holds a PhD degree in Political and Social Sciences from Université Libre De Bruxelles. He teaches MA courses on refugees and international migration at the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies at BZU. He is also a community activist.

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Enmaa'/Akkar Camp, Baddawi camp, Baddawi Mount, Barelias, Al-Housh and Burj al-Barajneh.

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