

Humanitarianism in Highly Religious Contexts: Responding to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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This essay is part of a series that deals with the displacement crises in the Mediterranean and Andaman Seas. The essays examine the myths and misconceptions that have pervaded discussions about these crises, and with the constructive measures, as well as the constraints and capacity deficiencies that have hampered the responses to them. See [more ...](#)



The current global refugee crisis, marked by the displacement of almost 60 million people,^[1] is not a new phenomenon. It is merely the most recent of successive waves of refugees who are fleeing conflict, persecution, destruction of their homes and livelihoods, and death. Syria has over 4.39 million refugees (as of December 2015^[2]), with another 7.6 million internally displaced (as of July 2015^[3]). The logistics of providing Syrians protection and humanitarian assistance are growing complex and suffering from a significant shortage of funds. There is also the increasing challenge of the religious dimensions of why people are fleeing from their homes. This impacts the assistance and protection that is provided to them, as well as the policies and social attitudes that confront them in their host countries. While religious wars and persecution are not a new phenomenon, responding to them in the light of the Red Cross Code of Conduct has challenged the accepted principle in humanitarian assistance of ensuring that religious dimensions do not hinder the aid that is provided.

Humanitarian Principles and the Challenge of Religion

The aid community has not always viewed faith and religion with suspicion. In the post-World War II years—according to a 1953 study—90 percent of all post-war relief was provided by religiously affiliated agencies.^[4] However, in the decades that followed, the religious motivations for humanitarianism were replaced by a secular worldview,^[5] as religion came to be seen as a hindrance to progress.^[6] The suspicion (sometimes overtly stated) is that local religious institutions would not be able to adhere to the humanitarian principles of impartiality.^[7]

The first five principles of The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief^[8] articulate the fundamental assumptions of humanitarian assistance being nonpolitical and impartial in terms of religion, creed, race, and nationality. The emphasis is on aid being unconditional and based only on need. The only driver for the assistance should be the humanitarian imperative. Yet, this needs to be balanced with a respect for local culture and customs, which invariably includes religion, religious values, and religious institutions in society.

Religion is an integral part of Arab society and life in the Middle East.[9] However, most scholars between World War II and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 did not see religion as a dynamic force within Arab society. [10] While they acknowledged its reality as part of culture, with the rise of Arab nationalism, socialism, Zionism, and liberal thinking, they reckoned it as having a diminishing influence on Arab society. Scholars presumed that the Middle East would follow the path of the European Enlightenment. However, the last few decades have seen a rise in religiosity in the Arab world.[11] There is little separation between religious institutions—and their leaders—and the state. Religion has become deeply meshed with the politics and structure of the modern state.[12] National identity is not only defined by religion, but often individuals have their religion stated on their identity cards.[13] Public and private morality in a number of countries is legislated through Shariah. While it varies in scope between the various countries, the state controls religious activity.[14] Civil society and civil activism have deep religious roots, dating back to Muslim reformers in the early centuries of Islam and Christian missions in the 1800s. Religious organizations and mission agencies (both Muslim and Christian) provide extensive social services in health, education, and other charitable and development activities as an expression of their faith.

Religion is a fundamental building block of Lebanese society and politics.

While Lebanon is probably the most politically and socially liberal Arab country in the Middle East, religion is still a fundamental building block of society and politics. There are 18 officially recognized religious confessions in the country, and all citizens must belong to one.[15] Political parties are primarily aligned along religious lines. While there are still many mixed neighborhoods, one of the legacies of the civil war (1975-1990) was the mass movements of populations, resulting in the informal segregation of neighborhoods according to religion and confession. Multireligious or civil marriages are against the law and not recognized. Secularism and secular civil society have a very small foothold in the country.

Lee and Shitrit summarize how deeply embedded religion is in the national psyches and the political realities of the Arab world:

At the moment, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, religion seems central to much that is happening in the region. States rely on it for identity and legitimacy; civil organizations use it to goad members into action; radical groups engage in violence in the name of religion; and individual Middle Easterners appear more committed to religion than had previous generations.[16]

While the Arab Spring expressed the desire for secular, nonsectarian democracy, the movements were either hijacked by radical Islamic groups or brutally suppressed by dictatorial regimes. Surprisingly, in spite of the resurgence of religion and religiosity in the Arab world, the nation-state in its various permutations—however disempowered—still exists.

While religion is deeply enmeshed in Arab society, a further complicating factor is the tribal mentality of much of society. Abu Zayd ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun al-Hadhrami (known as Ibn Khaldun), the 14th Century Tunisian Arab historian and sociologist observed that, “only tribes held together by group feelings can live in the desert...”[17] since the group ensured the survival and well-being of the individual. Yet this obligation was always limited in practice to the immediate group, family, or clan and very

rarely beyond it.[18] The reason for this is the concept of *assabiyah*, which Ibn Khaldun refers to as group solidarity or groups consciousness.[19] A focus on group cohesion ensures the survival of the group but in the process excludes the outsider or other groups. The implication of this is that during times of crisis, the groups defined by tribe, clan, and religion will help their immediate members to the exclusion of those who do not belong. Every religious group has local charitable organizations that address the needs of group members primarily.

With religion so deeply embedded in society, the challenge for humanitarian agencies is to understand how to navigate the attitudes of exclusion as well as the social and institutional realities of religion, while being impartial and unconditional in the aid that is provided.

Moving Beyond the Tribal Mentality

In understanding the religious landscape of the context, the question is whether there are institutions within the community that have credibility with the local population and have the reach within the community through which humanitarian assistance could be provided. In Lebanon, where the government has not allowed for the establishment of formal refugee camps, the refugees are scattered in communities across the country. Most are living in any kind of formal or informal structure that they could access. This required institutions in the community who knew where the refugees were living, as well as knowing how to navigate the range of attitudes toward the refugees. The local municipality did not have the capacity or the resources to be actively involved. In the medium to smaller communities, there were no secular civil society organizations. The only institutions were the mosques and churches, which were focal points in the community for religious and social activities. The question was whether both types of religious institutions could reach beyond their constituency and operate with impartiality and 'non-conditionality.'

In Lebanon, the presence of the international humanitarian community and the large NGOs mitigated against the tribal mentality mentioned earlier, in that they provided humanitarian assistance to those in need regardless of their religious or confessional affiliation. The challenge for many of these agencies was to find local partners (and staff) who could go beyond their social and religious affiliation and who knew the local community. Most of the local partners (NGOs) were limited in their capacity to address needs beyond their immediate group of existing clients and beneficiaries.

Social scientists acknowledge that religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples are an integral part of communities. As social institutions in the community, they have obligations to that community. They not only address matters of spirituality but also provide and build social capital, besides being venues through which social services are provided. Plamen Sivov asks whether institutions such as churches can have a role as agents of community development, when previously the welfare state provided services and managed change.[20] While acknowledging that the local church as an institutional service provider has no distinct advantage compared to other NGOs or the government, Sivov instead describes the local church as a distinct community. He writes:

Whenever a communal spirit, high level of personal motivation or a personal approach to the sometimes dehumanized 'target groups' is needed, the church has a lot to offer. The church cannot compete on the grounds of quantity, but it has no match on the grounds of quality or holistic

personalized approach, when it comes to provision of different kinds of care for the vulnerable groups.[21]

Besides knowledge of the community, it is this communal spirit and holistic approach to human beings that could, if properly trained, prove vital in addressing the needs of dehumanized refugees.

Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

As the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon escalated starting in April 2011, many wondered whether the churches had a role in responding to the humanitarian needs. The largest churches (e.g., Catholic churches) responded through their institutionally affiliated aid agencies such as Caritas and Jesuit Relief Service (JRS), and the Orthodox through International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). The smaller Protestant churches had no specific institutional relief agency assisting them. The institutional arm of the Baptist churches in the country, a small NGO called Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) provided support to individual churches (not just Baptist) that were interested in responding to the needs of the Syrian refugees. This was strategic as many of these churches were in small communities or in parts of the city with which the large international NGOs were not familiar. The challenge was to get these churches to move beyond their tribal mentality of taking care of only their own.

LSESD worked with the pastors and many of the key local church leadership in training and mentoring them on how to respond to the humanitarian needs by setting up systems to identify beneficiaries and by tracking the commodities and report on them. The focus was also on being impartial and unconditional when providing assistance. Beneficiaries had to be identified solely based on need and not on the basis of religion or clan. This was not an easy process because of the deep hatred many Lebanese harbor toward the Syrians due to the atrocities committed by the Syrian army and their allies during their occupation of Lebanon during the civil war. One church lost 85 percent of its members when the pastor and the leadership decided to help Syrian refugees. There also had to be no conditionality, such as requiring the beneficiaries to attend religious activities or take any literature. This went against the grain of what many churches thought they should be doing, as evangelizing is part of their identity.

The training and mentoring of local church leadership by the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) proved invaluable ...

The training and mentoring of local church leaders proved invaluable as many of the churches began to understand their role in the community and the need to respond to the humanitarian imperative with impartiality. Many of these churches were also able to provide community and emotional support for refugees who had lost their extended families. The added benefit was to be able to utilize motivated volunteers from within the church community. The churches were strongly advised to build relationships with key Islamic leaders and Imams in their areas. Many did, which was a critical step in peacebuilding in a country already deeply divided along sectarian lines and now feeling the tensions of the conflict spilling over from Syria.[22]

Conclusion

While the LSESD's initiative did not address the underlying issues of the conflict, by getting churches to see beyond their sectarian community and provide assistance without conditionality, it was possible to get them to see the value of international humanitarian standards.^[23] This required considerable training and mentoring, and came at a cost to the local church community. It is acknowledged that working through local religious institutions is a significant challenge, but one that needs to be explored further in contexts such as the Middle East.

[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase," June 18, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>. This figure is from 2014 and would now be significantly higher as the number of Syrian refugees has grown in 2015.

[2] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Syrian Regional Refugee Response," <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

[3] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), "Syria IDP Figures Analysis," <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/figures-analysis>.

[4] Elizabeth Ferris, "Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, No. 858 (2005): 315.

[5] Michael Barnett and Janice Stein, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 5.

[6] Ben Jones and Marie Juul Petersen, "Instrumental, Narrow, Normative? Reviewing Recent Work on Religion and Development", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 7 (2011): 1292.

[7] Kathryn Kraft, "Faith and Impartiality in Humanitarian Response: Lessons from Lebanese evangelical churches providing food aid," *International Review of the Red Cross*, (2015): 2-3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000570>.

[8] 1) The humanitarian imperative comes first. 2) Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone. 3) Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint. 4) We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government foreign policy. 5) We shall respect culture and custom.

[9] Robert Lee and Lihi Ben Shitrit, "Religion, Society and Politics in the Middle East," *The Middle East 13th Edition*, ed. Ellen Lust (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2013), 209-244.

[10] Other than the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and a few other smaller groups, political Islam was unknown during this period.

[11] Ibid, 214-221.

[12] Ibid, 221-223.

[13] In most countries, other than in Lebanon, a person's religion on their ID card cannot be changed, implying there is no religious freedom and that religious conversions are not allowed.

[14] Lee and Shitrit, "Religion," 228-231.

[15] Rupen Das and Julie Davidson, *Profiles of Poverty: The Human Face of Poverty in Lebanon* (Beirut: Dar Manhal al Hayat, 2011), 40.

[16] Lee and Shitrit, "Religion," 244.

[17] Quoted in Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): x.

[18] Bruce Malina writes about collectivistic societies, "Should a group member fall ill, the goal of an individual's healing is group well-being. Focus is on the ingroup, cooperation with ingroup members, maintenance of ascribed status, and group-centered values." Bruce J. Malina, "Collectivism in Mediterranean Culture," *Understanding the Social World Of The New Testament*, eds. Richard E. DeMaris and Dietmar Neufeld (London: Routledge, 2010), 23.

[19] *Assabiyah* is what binds society, family, tribe, religion and nation. It gives people a sense of belonging and ensures stability of institutions in the community. It is the driving force behind all social change. The fear is that a loss of group cohesion as described by *assabiyah* will result in the destruction of the community. Fida Muhammad writes, "Disintegration of collective consciousness creates anomie (moral deregulation) ... Loss of *assabiyah* will also create moral and economic individualism, but will end up in the destruction of a civilization." Fida Mohammad, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A Comparison Between Hegel, Marx And Durkheim," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1998): 34-37.

[20] Sivov was writing about his experience in Bulgaria as it transitioned from a post-Soviet society.

[21] Plamen Sivov, "The Church as an Agent of Community Development in Bulgaria," *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2008): 214-215.

[22] This was intentionally planned as part of Track II diplomacy of non-state actors in a conflict zone maintaining contact and conducting confidence-building activities.

[23] For a critical assessment of the work done through LSESD see Kathryn Kraft, "Faith and Impartiality In Humanitarian Response: Lessons from Lebanese evangelical churches providing food aid," *International Review of the Red Cross*, November 16, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1816383115000570>.

