The Everyday Experience of Humanitarianism in Akkar Villages
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Abstract

Within the framework of the Syrian humanitarian crisis, this paper aims to understand the way everyday practices are changing in response to humanitarian programs currently in place in North Lebanon, through the use of a bottom-up ethnographic approach. Rather than delving deeper into the technical analysis of humanitarian policies and programs, the fieldwork focused on the everyday experience of beneficiaries, from the local and the new refugee communities. Prior to the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the humanitarian industry, as well as the state, had neglected North Lebanon, to a large extent. The present paper will examine the qualitative changes that the humanitarian market has been engendering over the past two years, concerning the massive flow of refugees into Lebanon, which is a non-signatory country to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. People's accounts suggest that the Syrian refugee community is becoming frustrated with the alleged neutrality and depoliticization of humanitarian assistance, which merely aims at alleviating their suffering, without concrete action to put an end to the war in Syria. On one side, the initial ethnicization of needs implied that beneficiaries were placed in specific categories before being granted access to services; the reiterated use of aid provision as a strategy to gain international legitimacy politicized humanitarian assistance further. On the other side, interviewed humanitarian practitioners revealed how they continue to defend the "alleviation-of-suffering" logic. To explore the humanitarian sphere, notions of agency and citizenship in historically neglected regions have been used, through utilizing a grounded theory, where empirical data comes before hypothetical theories. This was archived through in-depth interviews with faith-based, secular, international, and local organizations and by relying on the researcher's participatory observation of the day to day living of aid beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The ethnographer's emotional response to the experiences shared with field companions is inevitably incorporated in the methodology. Thus, this paper aims at elaborating a data-driven critique of the impact of non-state structures – which proliferate in the emergency sphere, in which Lebanon eternally finds itself entangled – on the rarely studied everyday life, in order to able to transcend macroscopic perspectives.

Introduction:

It is very common nowadays to come across reports discussing the negative impact of the Syrian humanitarian crisis on the Lebanese economy as a whole. On one hand, there have been several

attempts to focus on the victims and their plight, rather than looking at the complex dynamics of humanitarian intervention in the country. On the other, many organizations tend to disguise or justify their own political agenda in their impact assessment reports and fieldwork analyses,[3] which in turn are mostly quantitative, with little focus on the qualitative impact of their projects.

This report attempts to advance a grounded analysis of the social situation, as developed by the author, based on how people speak of and express their everyday living in times of emergency.

For such reasons, this paper should be read without confusing between, on one hand, the professional choices and humane intentions of humanitarian workers and, on the other, the reasons behind the shortcomings and failures of humanitarianism on the field.

1. Brief overview of Akkar's socioeconomic conditions prior to the Syrian humanitarian crisis.

The humanitarian needs in Lebanon today are undoubtedly huge, for both Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host communities. With the increasing influx of Syrian refugees, particularly from August 2011 onwards, Akkar's community, which is known to be one of the poorest communities in Lebanon, has largely felt the pinch.

Akkar's families, of which the average size is 4.7 individuals (higher than the national average), constitute 20.5% of the entire Lebanese population. They maintain a traditional sociocultural structure,[4] which engendered a Lebanese – and not only foreign – stereotype that the region is "primitive."

For example, Akkar has the highest poverty rate in the country, amounting to 63.3%[5] of its population. The region has been historically neglected and registers the worst household conditions in Lebanon after Hermel. The majority of Akkar's villages receive electricity from Electricité du Liban, but not all houses are connected to the electricity grid. In addition, the region ranks last in residential accessibility to the public water supply, despite its natural water resources; running water is taken from artesian wells or private water networks. There are many solid waste burning sites and dumps in the public environment, given that, in some towns, there is no garbage collection system provided by the municipality or private contractors. Public transportation is lacking and car ownership is very low. This renders schools, hospitals, and basic services difficult to access. Local inhabitants, hence, say that political candidates buy votes by promising new roads, which are rarely maintained.

Health insurance is predominantly accessed through people who decide to join the army, which is the most stable source of income for a large part of the population. In fact, those employed in the military sector (14.8%) constitute a larger number than those employed in the trade sector.[6]

The economic and employment conditions of Akkar have further worsened after the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon and later due to the destruction of the Nahr al-Bared [Palestinian refugee] camp in 2007. The battle between *Fatah al-Islam* and the Lebanese Army resulted in many casualties and injuries among civilians and army members, causing several disabilities.[7]

The effects of both wars had a big impact on revenue in the region. Businesses recorded a 91.5% reduction in income due to closures or damages to shops. This has led to decreased productivity and reduced purchasing power of consumers.[8]

In general, Akkar was largely excluded from most national and international emergency funds donated to rebuild and rehabilitate the war-stricken areas.

Transportation costs have also been widely underestimated by humanitarian entities working in Akkar to provide aid to the Syrian refugees. In interviews conducted between August 2012 and February 2013,[9] many newcomers, despite the introduction of home-deliveries of food and other relief items by NGOs, were still complaining about their inability to pay for their own transportation and mobility, and, hence, to reach the offices of such organizations. According to the accounts collected for the present research, this often prevented them from getting oil, food kits, medication, and other help they are entitled to receive. Local families and long-time Syrian migrants with vehicles often provide the service informally.

The downturn in the area is mainly a result of by the closure of the Lebanese-Syrian borders. This put an end to the option of getting cheaper goods from Syria, through the long-lasting tradition of smuggling, which had already been restricted by the previous conflicts of 2006 and 2007. In addition to this, the presence of Syrian workers in dire need of work was used as a pretext by most local and national employers to push for lowering the wages of the local workforce.[10] According to some Lebanese political leaders,[11] this "worsened the security situation," without actually specifying how and why.

In addition to these socioeconomic conditions, there is also a political context for the region which comes into light. Hamed, from the village of Bellanet al-Hisa, describes the days of liberation from the "*Syrian unjust oppression*" (to use his own words) in April 2005. One month after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the so-called "Cedar Revolution" (14 March 2005) broke out, leading to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territories. The statue of Hafez al-Asad, erected in the 1990s in the main square of Halba, got demolished by the local population. "I had never seen the people of my town so relieved before", said Ahmed, from Halba. Likewise, a couple of elderly men indicated the place where the center of the Syrian secret services used to be located (*markaz al-mukhabarat as-suriyya*). This shows a noticeable political weight and history of the Syrian regime's presence in the area, which adds more layers to the social context of Akkar.

The current economic deterioration of Akkar and all of Lebanon, either ascribed to external powers or to internal factors, has often been used by NGOs to shake off criticism of their operations, as well as a self-legitimizing tool to intervene.

2. The emergence of humanitarian structures in Akkar

The majority of the interviewed faith-based NGOs, which had been operating in Akkar, were mainly

Sunni Muslim. They focused on the provision of charity services to orphans, low-income recipients, the disabled, and other vulnerable categories. Today, 22 Islamic NGOs are part of the Islamic Coordination Unit (*I'tilaf*). They use a a faith-based approach to the provision of services, for the most part, and have been known to be working in the region for a long time (mainly since the 1990s).[12] For them, aid provision to Syrians becomes "just one event in the history of their social services in the country."[13]

For example, the head of an Islamic NGO[14] complained about the fact that international organizations always had more resources, but did very little in the area, compared to the constant domestic efforts to improve the region in non-emergency times as well.

Apart from the absence of systematic literature around Akkar, municipalities are never mentioned by the local community, in relation to provision of basic services. In contrast, the actions of the central state are often invoked in everyday accounts. While some of the present needs are not preventable, dismal lawlessness and widespread insecurity stem from the structural weakness of the Lebanese state in asserting its presence in the region. Such feelings of abandonment, lack of control, and economic precariousness are generally considered to contribute to feeding the militia culture and, thus, engendering recurrent outbursts of violence.[15]

Many humanitarian organizations have therefore abandoned previous local development projects in the Lebanese areas less targeted by the Syrian migration flow,[16] and switched their operational agenda from development to humanitarian efforts, in order to "neutrally" engage with the Syrian crisis.[17]

In order to help the area sustain the influx of refugees, some of the first measures used by NGOs was cash payments to local families and the refurbishment and improvement of housing to enable them to host newcomers and provide free accommodation to refugees. Similarly, NGOs started providing relief supplies such as mattresses, heaters, and other winterization kits to local households, insofar as they were hosting Syrian refugees. Thereby, they were aiming at empowering both the new inhabitants of Akkar and the old ones, in a bid to compensate for past state and non-state neglect suffered during peace time and the absence of political interests in this region, unlike the south of the country (that had been occupied by Israel between 1978 and 2000).

The sudden proliferation of NGOs in the area, while conceiving of themselves as socially necessary, is a matter of controversy in the local community. "I think they all came here now because they're going to increase their funding thanks to the war in Syria. They would have not moved a single finger for us otherwise. Have you ever seen them around before?!" said Ghassan, who owns a car repair garage in Halba, with resentment.

The goal is not to generate resentment in the local community, declares Ana in the interview conducted at the UNHCR Protection Section in Qobaiyat in December 11, 2012. "To be honest," she added at that time, "the number of programs addressing both groups are still few, but we are making progress." By contrast, War-Child Holland, interviewed in October 2012, had mentioned several schools and programs addressing both Lebanese and Syrians, in operation at that time. Despite these controversial opinions, past neglect should carefully guide humanitarians in the planning of the ongoing programs.

To their credit, NGOs have increasingly channeled resources through Lebanese public services. For example, healthcare has seemingly improved for both Lebanese and Syrians. Amal, from al-Raqqa, who was resettled in al-Bahsa, says: "After two years in this tent, there is finally a mobile clinic I can benefit from." Nonetheless, according to the interviewees, aid was initially allocated only when the Syrians arrived, especially from early March 2012. However, the Lebanese residents felt, once again, that they were not the humanitarian priority. The local community's disaffection and mistrust towards the institutions, which had been developing throughout the past decades, cannot be eradicated now. The humanitarian industry cannot certainly sweep away years of state neglect. Nonetheless, it could at least avoid drawing up its plans, as though it was operating in a social void, empty of past and present frictions, which, in turn, are materially fueled by the way aid itself is distributed and people get selected.[18]

The humanitarian response has apparently failed to alleviate tensions. Rather, it initially inflamed them, with the allocation of the most visible part of aid (household items, food vouchers, survival kits) exclusively to Syrian refugees. In the initial stage, some NGOs even denied aid to Palestinians, who had mainly fled the heavily bombarded Yarmouk camp, under the pretext that they are usually covered by UNRWA services. As a result, a practitioner working for an international NGO in Tripoli maintained having been witness to tensions arising between Syrian Palestinians and Syrian citizens.

While ending the violence is not one of the principles of humanitarian organizations, their intervention should at least not fuel tensions. In this sense, partially because of the high turnover of humanitarian workers and the scarce attention in maintaining records in an already unstable and ephemeral social environment, NGOs have been historically unable to identify local capacities for peace[19] and draw on them to trigger betterment, as it will be shown later.[20]

In this regard, eligibility criteria have been a moot point. Newly designed programs, both for Syrians and Lebanese, as indicated by a UNHCR Protection Officer interviewed on February 6, 2013, are increasingly reflecting the moral logic of humanitarianism, according to which the beneficiaries would be addressed through assigning a single victimized moral identity. Nonetheless, even homogenized categories of beneficiaries would still give birth to internal frictions, which carry the diversified weight of social abandonment, war trauma, and deprivation. But according to internationals and locals witness to the Syrian humanitarian crisis, practitioners ignore such a diversification.

3. Local hospitality: a controversial issue

Lebanese host communities are said to be no longer able to absorb new flows of refugees in their homes. According to field observations, hospitality is mostly provided when relying on financial assistance in the form of remittances or cash payments by NGOs. "I think it has not been a good move to pay families to host Syrians," says Sarah, who works for an international secular NGO based in Qobaiyat. "We basically made them dependent on people that are not independent themselves and we can only arrange the accommodation for them just for one year. What are they going to do next? What have we changed by doing so?"

Walid, in Halba, during a field visit in November 2013, says that he is fed up with the worsening economic situation, and that the impact of NGOs has not changed the direction of the crisis, as it was not even initially meant to do that. "It is not like before. There used to be empathy (*ta'atuwf*), now it's disappeared. Everyone wants just to get rid of all them." Najwa, a baker in Halba, even thinks that Hafez al-Asad's times were better on the whole. Past regional misery always tends to be experienced as more tolerable than the ongoing one.

Syrian refugees are not living in official and logistically organized refugee camps – whose implementation has so far been refused by the Lebanese government[21] – and are therefore scattered across different regions in Lebanon, either as guests of households or as rent payers. It is generally widespread among Lebanese to sometimes use the idea of hospitality as a moral tool to exhibit the dignity of Akkar's people and their great values. A segment of Syrian refugees see hospitality as a expression of the great empathy of Akkar's people towards the Syrian cause, which had deep historical roots in the years of Assad's military presence in the region.

According to some people in al-'Abdeh, Bebnin, Wadi Khaled, Halba and al-Bahsa, local hospitality can be depicted, instead, in terms of greediness *tout court*, as it ends up being an economic opportunity for local families. In this way, they tend to represent this Lebanese region as bearing such an inherently negative view towards Syrians. They are said to take advantage of the displacement of new refugees to increase the housing market prices and exploit cheap workforce, expressing their racism and moral superiority towards Syrians in this manner and taking revenge of the past years of Syrian oppression.

A further tension emerges between the newly arriving refugees and the Lebanese communities. While the latter consider themselves as hosts, the former develop a sense of conditionality of their presence, as long as they are willing to get exploited by local people. The common feeling that can be deduced after field research is that the Syrian newcomers relate differently to the determinism of getting humiliated and objectified, in being passive beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance and cheaper workers. Taking livelihoods from outside and resettling outside their country still seem to represent factors of flawed moral dignity, which, to them, is currently difficult to rehabilitate. Among them, frustration is the tangible consequence.

Either way, through media representations and NGOs' reports, hospitality has become the demonstrative tool *par excellence* conveying an ethical judgment: Akkar as greedy or bountiful.

It is hard to draw clear lines around the theme of hospitality and ascertain how many families host for free and how many of them, instead, get money to host – these finances are mostly granted by international NGOs (like the Saudi Taiba Association located in Halba). This is the reason why it is much more important to consider what the idea of hosting produces in Lebanon's everydayness and how it has changed people's daily interactions. This is an aspect the mass media has focused on the least.

In this respect, it is worth noting that many, in fact, spoke "unwilling hospitality", as put forward by scholar Jacques Derrida,[22] stemming from official discourses that portray the Syrian refugees' presence as an "existential problem for Lebanon."[23] The unintentionality of coping with those people who have "overstayed their welcome" is slightly compensated by services provided to the local

community, in addition to the increased financial income that a small segment of the Akkar community is able to gain, due to the presence of refugees and aid actors.[24]

Hospitality, for example[25], now increasingly coexists with insecurity. "I don't let my child play in the street with others. I don't know who they are, and who can see them. I'm afraid he's gonna get kidnapped or raped. We don't feel free and safe. I got a dog to watch out for my tent because I mistrust everyone here," says a Syrian woman resettled in Bebnin.

4. Approaches to programs implementation as seen by people: emerging rifts between the beneficiaries and the providers

About the people

"Ethnicization" of needs and services is the approach according to which beneficiaries need to fit into specific categories in order to qualify for services and goods. In this sense, the way humanitarian programs have been implemented has ethnicized the human needs of such areas. The fact that every kind of assistance is provided according to the "ethnic category" – or, in any case, the specific social group – an individual is said to belong to, has made eligibility a watershed between those who are entitled to be helped and those who are not.

Khaled from Sudan, located in al-'Abdeh, clearly expressed the feeling of being part of a moral taxonomy of legitimation of rights:

"To satisfy the Lebanese citizens should be the first step taken by the Lebanese state… But there is a cruel hierarchy in Lebanon… the Lebanese come first, then the Palestinians, and finally the Iraqis and the Sudanese. Nothing of all this aid coming in is for *us*. And we have been here for a longer time, still in the same horrible conditions."

Again, Manal, from Yarmouk camp, tells that she was bounced back twice when she asked for assistance from some international NGOs: "I have lived like any other Syrian citizen, working for the government in Baramke. And now I'm treated as though my identity is not worth a single cent. I have also survived bombings like all other Syrian citizens. What are they waiting for before addressing us?"

A Lebanese secular NGO, while stating its desire to become the "house of human rights," implicitly recognizes the ethnicization of human causes that they tend to carry out aprioristically.[26] "We have a different agenda for Iraqi refugees, Syrians, and Palestinians. We treat them as diverse issues," as an official from the NGO explained. The approach of dealing with these causes, each based separately on the "ethnicity" of every group, has revealed its weakness in this latest humanitarian crisis, with a massive flow of Palestinian refugees coming into Lebanon from Syria, turning them into long time asylum seekers and "second degree refugees."

Hence, the humanitarian programs address the beneficiaries by labeling them in a unilateral manner, ignoring the variegated spectrum of experiences of deprivation and neglect. In other words, the

complex process behind the attribution of social labels to potential beneficiaries goes unheeded. Beneficiaries are therefore condemned to survive within the space occupied in the taxonomical pyramid of aid for Syrians, Lebanese affected by war, Palestinians, Iraqis, Sudanese, and so forth, and, thus, only receiving the services provided within that pre-established space.

In light of this consideration, particular humanitarian programs end up feeding into already existing cleavages, by establishing who is entitled to what and, consequently, engendering further tensions along ethnic or confessional lines.

About NGO practitioners

The generalized approach to aid provision, adopted by some interviewed humanitarian staff, can be called "humanitarian orientalism." This attitude can be attributed to both international and local actors. So to speak, humanitarians advance the idea of the "necessity" of their intervention in the targeted areas. Their intervention in the field is legitimized by the fact that it is supposedly neutral and impartial, and, therefore, incomparably fair.

As evidence of such socially risky attitude among humanitarian practitioners, an international practitioner working for an international NGO presently located in Qobaiyat expresses her conviction that "we *have to* be there, since the local people, particularly if affiliated to other confessional groups, won't do anything for the others. There would simply be a huge void of help in the places where we're currently intervening." This statement does not take into account the fact that, probably, if that position was not occupied by an allegedly impartial foreigner, it could have been taken up by a local, who may want to challenge her/his system of values and beliefs to take part in this social endeavor. As evidence of this, Mariam, a Lebanese social worker, complains how little paid is her job:

"I studied social work as I thought I would find work easily here. I was quite disappointed to find out that all well-paid positions are already held by temporary staff, international or trained overseas. I think it's nonsense: what if I have no funds to study overseas? We're doomed to unskilled labor, and to leave Lebanon in the hands of foreigners."[27]

Likewise, international NGOs are aware of their material supremacy in terms of resources and funding, even if they are increasingly cooperative with local actors. To work with local partners seems to be, in fact, the last trend to discard the image of humanitarianism as a disguised form of colonialism. Nonetheless, local partners do not become stronger out of such collaborations,[28] let alone the Lebanese state, which, on the contrary, faces more competition and has no interest to fight.

To this end, some local NGOs working in the southern suburbs of Beirut said they cooperated with bigger international organizations during the 2006 July War. The only choice they had was to do the same now:

"We basically served the international NGOs as a guarantee that they are relying on internal forces, offering a local perspective and a fine-grained knowledge of the territory. In some cases, they also bank

on us to implement projects on the ground, since locals, in time of conflict, are said to be at lesser risk in terms of safety," according to a Lebanese practitioner working for a small refugee center."[29]

Additionally, international volunteers working in the same entities often complained about the opportunistic partnerships between international and local NGOs, especially within short-term projects. "Even if a local NGO becomes temporarily able to attract more funds by collaborating with a bigger one for a given humanitarian cause, when there's a new emergency crisis, their support stops. Lots of projects died out because of this," said another practitioner working in Tripoli.[30]

About the social structure of the addressed villages

Both official permits and informal access to resources are sometimes guaranteed by *makhatir* (literally elected individuals, responsible for local administrative affairs) and local authorities. This strengthens the old tribal-like system of Akkar and the *wasta* system - network of connections to help access services - although several NGOs claim to be aiming at "modernizing" the area administratively.

A cleavage between the central state and pseudo-feudal decentralization of administrative power and resource management is also identifiable among the side effects of how humanitarian assistance is implemented at the local level. Administrative decentralization is certainly not leading to major coordination or better resource management in Lebanon. In order to operate, humanitarian agencies working in the North have to comply with the regulations imposed by local leaders and intermediaries, who usually are the people in charge of managing all local affairs.

This off-the-cuff cultural respect for the local structure of Akkar's villages, in some interviewees' perception, ends up legitimizing dusty patterns of pseudo-tribalism and nepotism. However, criticism of the apparent depoliticization of humanitarian actors towards conflicts is answered by implicitly blaming internal actors for not having been able to dismantle the pseudo-tribal social structures of several Lebanese rural towns. These structures are still impinging on the humanitarian dynamics proposed by the internationals, which, from the perspective of the latter, would surely run smoothly after a renewal in the local commnuity. On this issue, Rania, who works for an international NGO based in Halba,[31] says: "At the end of the day, what can we be criticized for as humanitarian workers? We haven't made Lebanese history and we can just patch up the fragments of a part of society that has not modernized itself yet."

Such a type of transnational governance, implemented by the humanitarian apparatus in conflict areas previously neglected by the state, allegedly conveys, in the form of assets, both neutrality and institutional modernization. It behaves as a the ethical actor, able to reform the agenda of a misbehaving central state, and, paradoxically, becoming the rival of the state, as time passes. In this sense, non-state actors with major interventions in voids of public action, purport to be the "modernized alternative" to collapsing and corrupted states.

In light of this, non-state actors are not seen as supporters of reformist internal tendencies. Rather, they are winking at old local leaders that have all interests in monitoring the aid distribution process, in some

cases. Thereby, small Lebanese villages are thrown into a sort of bipolar schizophrenia. On the one hand, they think they can get the desired administrative modernization in marginalized contexts not addressed by the Lebanese state by offering their territory to the international humanitarian apparatus. On the other, external actors have sometimes relied on the corrupted traditional structures to guarantee their territorial access, the same structures, which, in some cases, local people would like to liberate themselves from.

Frederik,[32] who works for UNICEF, said: "I was provided with the list of people that were entitled to get financial support for kids' schooling material by the local authority. After the distribution, several people came to me complaining that they hadn't even heard about this possibility of help."

Humanitarian actors explain such a tendency by highlighting that they cannot access particular areas except through local mediators, whom, in turn, the local community does not always appreciate. In this sense, international actors feed into internal cleavages while advocating for their elimination.

5. The social responsiveness to the NGOs' modalities of implementation

- Hostility between Lebanese and Syrians was initially fueled by aid agencies through the already mentioned ethnicisization of needs. The shared *de facto* nationhood between the Akkar region and the Syrians of the neighbouring area got overlooked by aid agencies, ever since the beginning of their intervention, as such agencies are often unaware of local capacities for peace. This cleavage that humanitarianism is reproducing is therefore stigmatized in a "national" – increasingly portrayed as "ethnic" – opposition between Syrians and Lebanese.

- Politicization of aid: The accountability of all NGOs (also supposedly apolitical and secular) is gained or maintained through provision of services to their – potential or regular –constituencies. A consequent decrease in universal social protection is identifiable, as aid paradoxically joins the other defining categories in reinforcing community identity and social divisions. In this regard, non-beneficiaries of aid in Akkar often complained about *wasta*[33] and described as "corruption" the whole mismanagement of resources with no distinction of cases. Politics, hence, emerges from such a disenchanted common imaginary as a mere negative factor to be avoided.

As the July War seemed to be the opportunity for the March 8 coalition, similarly, the March 14 coalition is believed to be the political entity mostly involved in the aid industry to Syrians because of its political agenda.

Aid, this way, becomes merely a strategy to show the impartial humanness of political parties or confessional groups, which try further to hide their well-known political agendas. Humanitarianism is therefore used by political parties to neutralize their ideological stance in the other's eyes.

At the outset of the Syrian influx into Lebanon, the political use of the Syrian cause to promote a certain "humanitarian image" and credibility, gave rise to big concentrations in particular areas of the country like the North, where refugees, mostly coming from the areas bombed by the regime, say they feel

more comfortable with the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, according to updated interviews, things seem to have slowly changed with respect to 2012. The Bekaa Valley, ?where Hezbollah occupies a large presence, is now hosting the largest number of refugees in Lebanon.[34] Needs pushed people to populate the southern region of Lebanon also, although the number is still incomparable to that of refugees in the North. This phenomenon of refugee movements around areas that do not reflect their confessional and, above all, political identity, may generate new demographic configurations in Lebanon, in the coming years.[35]

- Refugees are frustrated about what they consider to be international inaction. Emergency relief is aimed to alleviate people's suffering, while no *de facto* political or military intervention in Syria has been pursued. Althoughhile this observation does not certainly aim at encouraging particular ideological perspectives, it is noteworthy that Akkar's inhabitants view the international community as a hypocritical capitalistic entity boasting absolute neutrality.

In the fishermen's reality of al-'Abdeh and the rural villages of al-Bahsa and Bellanet al-Hisa, the interviewed refugees said they were fooled and disturbed by such apparent depoliticization of aid, often recalling the disengagement of the international community since the outset of the Syrian protests.

The alleged ethical purity of "humanitarian governance" is therefore source of harsh comments and distress. Even if humanitarians want to stay out of politics, they have to be aware that their actions do, in fact, have political effects on people's lives.

On this issue, the words of Ahmed, living in Bellanet al-Hisa, are meaningful: "You're all convinced that you'll have to just reconcile Syrians among themselves. We'll need to reconcile ourselves with the international community, instead, which betrayed us. We don't want food and shelters to survive in Lebanon, we want you to help us to stop all this".

These thoughts undermine the cornerstones of humanitarian neutrality, the alleviation of suffering, and their implementation as a successful strategy.

Refugees said they feel being used to make the humanitarian market viable, while humanitarians care about reaffirming their neutrality in doing their job. The frustration of some refugees in feeling passivized, despite some programs aiming at integration and self-empowerment, and their anger towards a detached international community, often described in terms of betrayal,[36] are key emotional factors that stem from such a brand-new proliferation of humanitarian programs in North Lebanon.

- Refugees' perception of getting forcibly depoliticized by NGOs stays in stark opposition to politicization of aid. Regardless of how empirically grounded all these expressed feelings actually are, refugees seem to highlight their loss of mobilization and self-reconstruction perspectives. The everydayness of Syrians living in Akkar therefore implies the constant frustration of being considered homogeneous refugee entities, ready to accept any kind of basic help. Thus, they develop a sense of insecurity and disaffection towards local, international, secular, and faith-based providers, without distinction.

As evidence of this, Haytham, a 47-year-old engineer from the Hama region, said he usually sells the

food vouchers he receives from UNHCR, to make donations in medical and financial support for the Free Syrian Army. Wael, 38 years old from Bab 'Amr, points out the need for creating external spaces for them, like discussion areas.

"With three people, we started gathering once a week to exchange the news about our villages of origin and to discuss the political perspectives in our country. Nearly all organizations want to give us food and mattresses. It's easier. That's also true that many people wouldn't survive without that, but they cannot reduce their action to that. We need more help for rent and medicines, for a package of bread I would pay just 2,000 Lebanese Lira. It's not the priority for most of us. They just pretend to listen to our requests. They see that we take whatever they give us and they think they are addressing the biggest needs. Of course we take if they give! Maybe should we start refusing to make our real needs emerge? We do need a safe space to meet each other, not just a shelter".

A municipality of Akkar, in fact, is said to have denied extra house-space requested by refugees. Most of the interviewed Lebanese community, comprehensibly caring for local stability, were in support of this decision by the municipality, fearing the political presence of Syrians, who might not simply be displaced people who need to survive, as humanitarians tend to approach them.

Diana, working in an international NGO in Qobaiyat, points out that, most of the time, donors refuse to fund projects that address people directly connected to armed groups in Syria. "This is hypocritical, as everything right now is connected to weapons. Some people who are based in these areas risk starvation because of this choice, which is still political. You cannot really distinguish the kind of beneficiaries you've got in front of you. So, sometimes, they don't just finance the whole project."

Foreign powers still hold political sway in the domestic scenario, while apparently preserving the neutrality of humanitarian aid. Although such politicization is hardly ever reflected by the acts of humanitarian workers, this disguising mechanism wants to give birth to an apolitical image of the foreign humanitarian market, while the latter is not marginal at all to local political realities.[37]

6. Findings to be taken into account

Alleviation of suffering and attempts of depoliticization:

The old humanitarian principle of alleviation of suffering is therefore questioned in a political environment, which is denied for reasons of security and stability. The NGOs' ethical attempt to hold up the image of apolitical actors, representing the whole international community to the refugee community, is at odds with the refugees' desire to stop the war in Syria and to claim their right to being political subjects, in the host country as well. Explicit requests for political space for debate are obviously advanced by a segment of the refugee community in Akkar, who are mostly male and come from opposition areas in Syria.

Chronic problems still engendering dissatisfaction:

Moreover, chronic poverty and lack of a *de facto* citizenship, able to meet the basic needs of local people and protect them on a daily basis, are still partially ignored by donations-driven NGOs, adding to the government's abandonment. An increased sense of undergoing injustice among the unaddressed population and a renewed sense of victimhood are feeding community oppositions and, therefore, increasing the possibility of outbursts of violence in the area.

As a result of the described scenario, increased disaffection towards governmental, non-governmental, local, international, faith-based, and secular structures of assistance and emergency relief can clearly be identified. People tend to equalize these categories of action, to a greater extent, with respect to the past. An environment of existing - and sometimes just perceived - insecurity and mutual mistrust between the various sides eventually stemmed from the dissatisfaction.

7. Recommendations on the basis of the fieldwork findings

To NGOs:

- Revise the basic principles of the standardized humanitarian approach, such as the alleviation of suffering and the efficiency of political neutrality. NGOs need to deal with the fact that their political agendas are inevitably known to beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. This is hard to be recognized and implemented, as it often jeopardizes the very existence of some NGOs in Lebanon, which need to abide by the political interests of their donors.

- Ensure that NGO actions do not further isolate some segments of the residents and the aid beneficiaries and try to give more room for human understanding and debate, going beyond the simple provision of emergency relief and basic assistance. Staff workers must become individuals to speak to, not merely providers (and here emerges the importance of recruiting people who know the language and are willing to work in the same place for the long run).

- NGOs should demonstrate their policies of inclusiveness on a practical level by ascertaining the prioritization of needs and by working for the reinforcement of the state and encouraging its assertion of power, rather than competing with it or taking its weakness for granted in an opportunistic manner.

To the Lebanese municipalities:

- Protect security in the discussed areas while avoiding the securitization of groups whose selection is carried out according to their ethnic and confessional "belonging" (i.e. establishing curfews for Syrian citizens in some municipalities, as it has already happened).

- Engage with long-term development plans to a greater extent. Indeed, emergency knowingly pays more than development and this is a matter of fact used opportunistically by state actors to refrain from asserting their factual presence.

In a nutshell, while humanitarian workers, complying with an emergency logic, address affected subjects and areas, the very nature of social injustice and old-date chronic poverty are seldom addressed by the state and by non-state structures, which usually replace state inefficiency.

Therefore, donors and practitioners should care less about how humanitarianism can contribute to progress and rather focus on how to make progress in humanitarianism itself, by further questioning the logic underlying it.
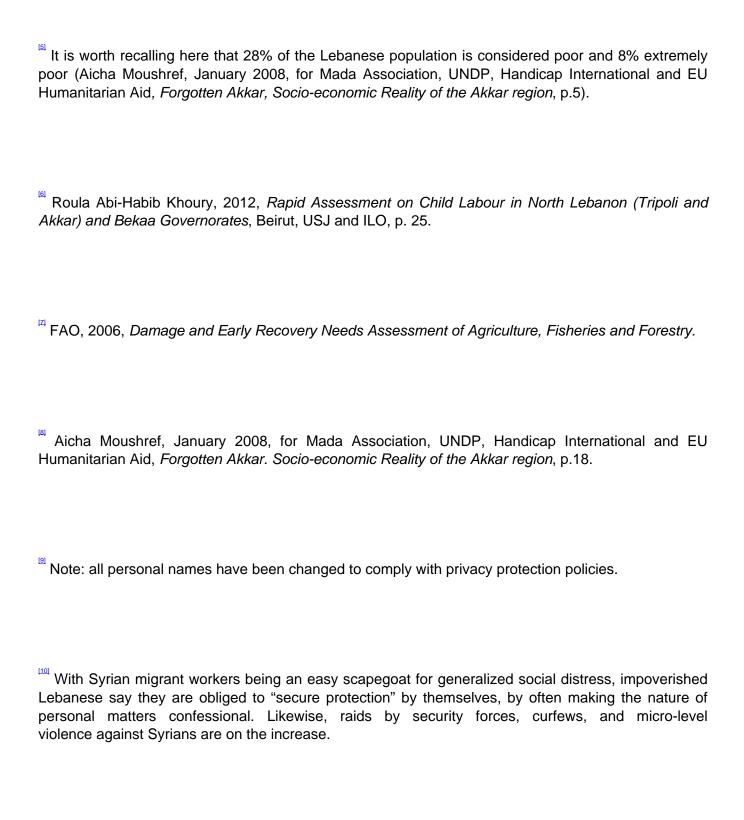
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[3] Too often, humanitarian workers tend to respond to critical analyses in a highly defensive manner, and, thus, resorting to mere ethical apology of their projects. This is a reminder of how humanitarianism, as Didier Fassin has noticed, aprioristically legitimizes itself (Didier Fassin, Richard Rechtman, 2009, *The Empire of Trauma. An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press). The rare exposure of the humanitarian apparatus to external criticism is due to the infrequent negotiation of its presence in a given territory or the implementation of its programs, in that it takes for granted that intervention possesses a moral rationale *per se*.

[4] Roula Abi-Habib Khoury, 2012, *Rapid Assessment on Child Labour in North Lebanon (Tripoli and Akkar) and Bekaa Governorates*, Beirut, USJ and ILO, p. 25.

[5] It is worth recalling here that 28% of the Lebanese population is considered poor and 8% extremely poor (Aicha Moushref, January 2008, for Mada Association, UNDP, Handicap International and EU Humanitarian Aid*, Forgotten Akkar, Socio-economic Reality of the Akkar region*, p.5).

[6] Roula Abi-Habib Khoury, 2012, *Rapid Assessment on Child Labour in North Lebanon (Tripoli and Akkar) and Bekaa Governorates*, Beirut, USJ and ILO, p. 25.

[7] FAO, 2006, *Damage and Early Recovery Needs Assessment of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry*.

[8] Aicha Moushref, January 2008, for Mada Association, UNDP, Handicap International and EU Humanitarian Aid, *Forgotten Akkar. Socio-economic Reality of the Akkar region*, p.18.

[9] Note: all personal names have been changed to comply with privacy protection policies.

[10] With Syrian migrant workers being an easy scapegoat for generalized social distress, impoverished Lebanese say they are obliged to "secure protection" by themselves, by often making the nature of personal matters confessional. Likewise, raids by security forces, curfews, and micro-level violence against Syrians are on the increase.

[11] This thinking is easily identifiable in former Energy Minister and current Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil's public speeches. Link last accessed on January 13, 2014, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/racism_and_indifference_bassil_as_an_example .

[12] The director of the coordination unit of the Islamic NGOs called *I'tilaf* was interviewed in Tripoli on February 3, 2013. More information can be found here (link last accessed on February 21, 2014): http://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/17676/?????-????-??????-????-????????-????????-???????-????-????????-?????-???-??????????-??????? .

[13] Interview conducted by the author with the Kuwaiti Education Association in Tripoli, January 14, 2013.

[14] Interview conducted by the author at Dar al-Fatwa, Halba, November 21, 2013.

[15] Despite the clearly deteriorating security situation in Lebanon, it is noteworthy that Akkar villages are historically less exposed to violent clashes, if compared to the reality of Ersal or Tripoli, which are highly affected by the Syrian conflict in terms of security.

[16] Among them, Taiba Association, a Saudi NGO in Halba, which reformulated its programs under a new name to meet Syrians' needs (Interview conducted on December 14, 2012). The majority of the faith-oriented organizations based in Akkar, previously addressing orphans and the vulnerable in the area, stopped most their programs for the Lebanese community, to cope with the expenses needed to finance aid to Syrians, whose cause is the priority on the political agenda of their foreign donors (mainly Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). Several of them have been created *ad hoc*, with the only goal of

providing support to Syrian refugees, in their wait for the Assad regime's departure.

[17] This often happens owing to the way donors channel funds, showing the perpetual priority of emergency plans in relation to more challenging development programs.

[18] Link last accessed on January 13, 2014: http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17538

[19] Such an issue has first been foregrounded by Mary B. Anderson, 1999,*Do No Harm. How Aid can support Peace or War*, Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

[20] The approach of international NGOs providing services to refugees in North Lebanon to the whole issue seems to be the following: treating the country as a mere satellite of the Syrian events, rather than as a longtime theatre of buried tensions that would just find their way to come to the fore and renew their modalities and fields. This idea is suggested by the description of the Syrian crisis in official discourses as merely "imported" or as an external "spillover" troubling Lebanon..

[21] The Lebanese government refuses the construction of refugee camps, as it does not desire to generate the same dreadful situation of Palestinians, whose right to return is still denied; their naturalization is opportunistically denied as well, in the name of the ideological refusal of conceiving Palestinians in Lebanon as permanent citizens. Needless to say, the naturalization (*tawtin*) of Palestinians would trigger further demographic issues within the country.
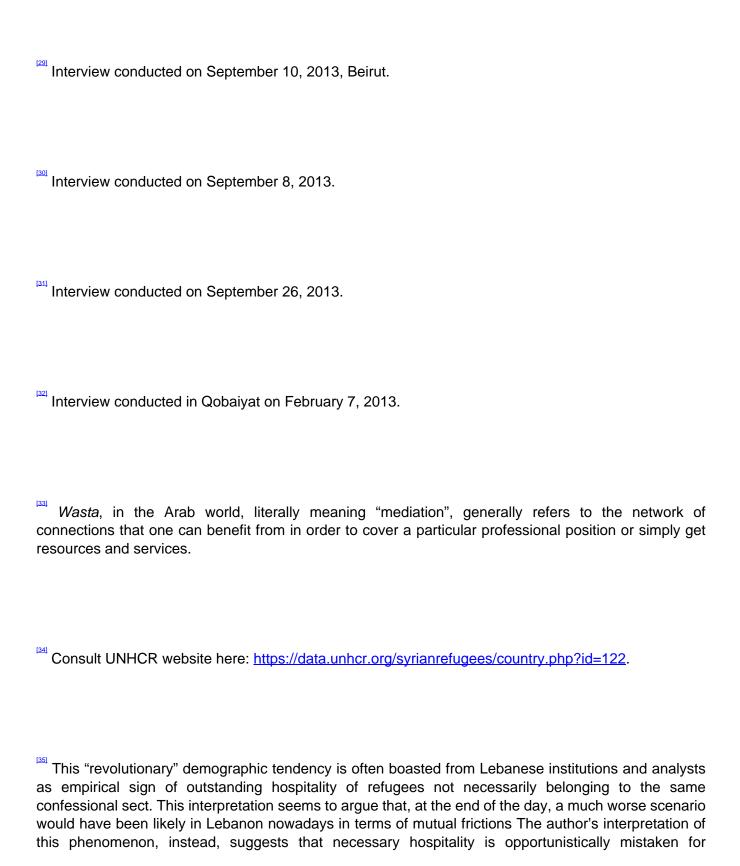
[22] Jacques Derrida, Anne Defourmantelle, 2000, *Of Hospitality*, Stanford, USA, Stanford University Press.

[23] Talk held by Lebanese Ambassador to the United States Antoine Chedid at the Wilston Center in Washington DC, October 29, 2013. Link last accessed on January 13, 2014: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/humanitarian-crisis-impact-syrian-refugees-lebanon.

[24] For instance, aid providers usually need local drivers, housing structures for themselves, retailers selling goods to be distributed, and other working staff employable in their field.

[25] This is an aspect also highlighted by the Lebanese NGO Alef. For more information consult: Alef-Act for Human Rights, September 2013, *Two Years On: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,* IKV Pax Christi.

[26] Interview conducted by the author on October 17, 2012, Wata al-Mossaitbeh, Beirut.

[27] Conversation with Mariam: ash-Shiyyah, Beirut, September 10, 2013.

[28] Three local NGOs have made the same declaration in the interviews conducted by the author in January 2013 in Halba.

[29] Interview conducted on September 10, 2013, Beirut.

[30] Interview conducted on September 8, 2013.

[31] Interview conducted on September 26, 2013.

[32] Interview conducted in Qobaiyat on February 7, 2013.

[33] *Wasta*, in the Arab world, literally meaning "mediation", generally refers to the network of connections that one can benefit from in order to cover a particular professional position or simply get resources and services.

[34] Consult UNHCR website here: https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122.

[35] This "revolutionary" demographic tendency is often boasted from Lebanese institutions and analysts as empirical sign of outstanding hospitality of refugees not necessarily belonging to the same confessional sect. This interpretation seems to argue that, at the end of the day, a much worse scenario would have been likely in Lebanon nowadays in terms of mutual frictions The author's interpretation of this phenomenon, instead, suggests that necessary hospitality is opportunistically mistaken for

voluntary and unconditioned hospitality.

[36] Farah, from Homs, interviewed in al-Bahsa on December 2, 2012: "The West and a part of Syrian society have betrayed, that's the only reason why we are still dying everywhere!".

[37] For example, the same NGO can look for state approval to intervene in particular areas of Syria, while, outside the country, mostly cooperating with Syrian opposition's actors.