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CHAPTER

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

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### Abstract

With the “localization of aid” principle being re-asserted during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, humanitarian work has been emerging as a complex set of hybrid moral assemblages and genealogies, rather than a “Western afflatus.” While hegemonic humanitarian actors are primarily involving local faith leaders in countries receiving refugees, the involvement of refugee faith leaders in relief assistance has remained overshadowed. This chapter is based on the author’s fieldwork with Syrian refugee faith leaders in Lebanon between 2018 and 2019, some of whom subsequently relocated to Turkey and Sweden. Such faith leaders locate themselves at the intersection between donors and implementers of aid, often providing services themselves. The chapter shows how they view transregional forms of aid not only as an effective way of restoring their own socio-spiritual role outside of Syria and of gatekeeping moral and religious knowledge in displaced communities, but also as an instrument of peacebuilding and social justice among the Syrian displaced worldwide. The author specifically interprets their aid work through the sociology of aiding inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s “spiritual activism” (2015), which combines practices of spirituality with political activism.

**Keywords:** humanitarianism, religion, spiritual activism, social justice, faith leaders, Lebanon, Syria, migration

**Subject:** Religious Studies, Religious Issues and Debates, Sociology of Religion, Religion

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### Author’s Note

I transliterated the names of places, research participants, and organizations, as well as local idioms and sayings, by adopting simplified conventions for the Levantine dialect.

## Introduction

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In the framework of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), there has been an increasing focus on the importance of better attuning humanitarian action to local habits, views, and practices in areas affected by a crisis, mostly identified as regions of the Global South. The “localization of aid” principle encouraged international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies responding to conflict-induced displacement to involve local faith leaders from the areas affected by crisis in official humanitarian programming. Indeed, most INGOs have started viewing faith leaders as agents of change and as effective vectors of community development (Wilkinson and Kraft 2020). INGOs tend to encourage the participation of citizen faith leaders in humanitarian and development programming in an effort to build rapid, safe, and sustainable access to local and refugee populations in need. In this context, literature on Muslim humanitarianism has been growing. While this body of literature has mostly focused on Global North countries, where many faith-based organizations’ (FBOs) headquarters are located (De Cordier 2009), it has more recently started to examine the Global South’s multi-scale responses to human displacement during and after a crisis (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011 and 2018; Thomson 2014; Ager and Ager 2015; Mouftah 2017; Mostowlansky 2019).

The recent involvement of faith leaders in humanitarian action points to a growing awareness within leading humanitarian agencies of the Global North that faith leaders can own, to varying degrees, social, cultural, and political capital. This polyvalent capital can trigger self-recovery and implement better living conditions during displacement (e.g., World Vision’s “Channels of Hope” on HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Gender, Maternal Newborn Child Health, and Child Protection programs in sub-Saharan African countries). Also, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has made efforts in this direction by organizing the 2012 UNHCR convening of the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Faith and Protection (Wurtz and Wilkinson 2020: 146). As a further example, in Lebanon, international partnerships with local faith leaders meant to train the latter in child protection principles began in 2017 (Wilkinson and Kraft 2020, 1). However, thus far, it has been noted (Drif 2018; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) that international agencies are not committed enough to such partnerships in order for local populations to embrace more effective civic and political engagement via assistance provision. The “South” is, rather, called upon in order for the “North” to shrug off international responsibility (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018) or to coopt southern ways of working into a northern agenda in order to serve neoliberal development goals (ibid.; Tomalin 2020). Practitioners themselves have indeed emphasized the risk of instrumentalizing local faith groups to build access to areas in need. The dialogue itself between international secular humanitarian agencies and local faith actors may turn out to be instrumental, not giving voice to contextual visions of human progress and development: “This can result in faith groups feeling used; their values and language hijacked” (Wiles and Mallonee 2020: 21). Furthermore, policy literature still refers to “traditional” and “cultural” local practices as unmodernized and therefore problematic, revealing a colonial touch in faith-compliant development thinking (Le Roux and Bartelink 2020: 211). This enduring colonial approach, which tends to legitimize or condemn locally grown initiatives, also reveals the enduring belief that humanitarianism is Western instigated by definition, and it is tacitly built on Western Christian values, such as the valorization of suffering (Fassin 2012: 248). Instead, humanitarianism historically involves hybrid moral assemblages and genealogies (Mostowlansky 2019: 237).

Importantly, INGO involvement with faith leaders has been limited to the so-called host communities in countries receiving refugees. In this framework, the involvement of refugee faith leaders in relief assistance for people in need is overshadowed. The faith leaders whose experiences I discuss here do not act as intermediaries for leading humanitarian actors in the Global North, a phenomenon that is starting to receive scholarly attention (Kraft and Smith 2018). Instead, they locate themselves at the intersection between (mostly private) donors and implementers of aid, with some of them providing services

themselves. At this stage of my research, occurring in the framework of the “Southern-led Responses to Displacement from Syria” project,<sup>1</sup> I discuss preliminary findings based on fieldwork that I have conducted in Lebanon between 2018 and 2019 and, remotely, in Turkey during 2019 and in Sweden during 2020. Such preliminary findings suggest that refugee religious authorities (*rijal ad-din* in Arabic, literally meaning “men of religion,” or more commonly called *ulema*, “Islamic scholars,” in English literature) view transregional forms of aid and support to displaced people not only as an effective way of restoring their own socio-spiritual role outside of Syria but also as an instrument of peacebuilding and social justice among Syrian-displaced communities worldwide. In this chapter, I do not aim to highlight the resources that religious traditions and theological concepts can bring to humanitarian action and thinking, which has been an important focus for some scholars of Religion (Rees and Rawson 2018: 174). Instead, I focus on the sociology of aiding inspired by Anzaldúa’s “spiritual activism” (2015), which combines traditional practices of spirituality with technologies of political activism, guiding faith leaders and people in need through the process of “healing the wounds” (ibid.) of displacement. The concept of spiritual activism can convey the indigenous approaches of these refugee faith leaders to aid and support provision. While Anzaldúa referred to a spiritual dimension of the individual, which did not necessarily relate to institutional religion, the motivation that undergirds the refugee faith leaders to assist people in need from a condition of displacement—while gatekeeping moral and religious knowledge in displaced communities—is comparable to her notion of spiritual activism: that is the need of self-growth and self-reflection to pave the way to material social justice and peace. In that sense, refugee faith leaders associated intimate betterment, which the condition of displacement offers as a possibility, with macro-political transformation.

Scholarly interest has followed the recent emphasis from “refugee guests” to “local hosts” in the 2030 SDGs, mirroring the history of northern humanitarian priorities. Notably, what are presently presented as “positive paradigm shifts” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019: S36) from refugees to local people, instead, imply the recycling of policies and practices that had already been adopted during the 1970s and 1980s in countries such as Malawi (Zetter 1996). In this framework, official humanitarian policies increasingly involved the merging of assistance provision for the displaced with assistance provision for vulnerable local people who receive forced migrants (OCHA 2017). As today’s humanitarian crises tend to be of protracted duration with vulnerable receiving populations needing long-term support, the importance of reconsidering the development-humanitarian nexus in international humanitarian discourse and practice has once again come to the fore. The increasing inclusion of local citizen faith leaders into international humanitarian programming happens in this framework.

In the countries neighboring Syria, there is a growing body of literature on faith-based and faith-inspired humanitarian action due to interest in local humanitarian responses to displacement (see Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager 2015; Ager and Ager 2015; Kraft 2016; Kraft and Smith 2018; Wagner 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2019). Scholars have also focused on the increasing involvement of faith-inspired regional aid provision, such as that funded by the Arab Gulf (Schmelter 2019), and in the so-called post-secular turn, characterizing local-international humanitarian partnerships (Tomalin 2020). In this context, scholarly interest in faith-based provision has often stemmed from approaching faith and secularism as dichotomic paradigms, where clearly defined religious and secular approaches to humanitarian action are discussed in an effort to develop more appropriate responses to protracted displacement. Instead, building upon recent literature proposing that a faith-focused approach is not antithetical to secularism (e.g., Ager and Ager 2015; Shakman Hurd 2017; Benthall 2008; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Lynch 2020), in this chapter I will show how spiritual activism defines refugee faith leaders’ approach to assistance provision, making religion without social justice-driven endeavors redundant and making politics without religion an impossible project toward peaceful societies. I start by noting that the Western-initiated humanitarian interventions—which have approached the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a ruling model of humanitarian neutrality, professionalism, and effectiveness—traditionally revolve around principles of neutrality and impartiality that externalize and discourage political stances and explicit social

justice-driven efforts. Against this backdrop, I argue that my interlocutors discard neutrality and, above all, the simulation of being neutral of some international actors, as an unethical act of complacency (*takhadol*) with the violence of the Syrian regime. They instead approach aid provision as an instrument of positive peace, namely being able to achieve “cooperation for mutual and equal benefit, empathy for harmony, feeling for each other’s suffering and fulfilment as parts of one’s own” (Galtung 1969: 619; 2015).

It is in a bid to investigate such “just” forms of humanitarianism that I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of spiritual activism. In some ways, the support networks these refugee faith leaders have managed to activate and enlarge resemble social movements, sharing principles of assistance and political purposes of justice and peace in Syria and for Syrians in exile. As some scholars have noticed (Daehnhardt 2020: 59), “social movements” worldwide have mobilized to implement different aspects of social justice while aiming to eradicate poverty and other sorts of inequality, sometimes identifying an inherent association of “social movement” with “mobilization” potential (Almeida 2019). I therefore conceptualize this form of justice-driven humanitarianism based on combined understandings of humanitarian assistance and social justice. I also build on Robert’s framing of faith-motivated philanthropy as an act of mercy, struggle for justice, and missional outreach, as is the case for Christian Orthodox humanitarianism (Robert 2016: 59). In this vein, the assistance provided and promoted by refugee faith leaders cannot be assessed as an emanation of international humanitarian programming. These refugee faith leaders are people who live among their communities in a shared condition of displacement and who desire to aid others because of their religious and social justice convictions. It is, however, emblematic of how local faith leaders have instead become the object of systematic humanitarian assessments of collaborations with international actors, as though their personal and collective mission could count only in the form of a career and in relation to standardized modalities of care and the assessing of such care.

Although their inclusion in mainstream humanitarianism is not needed in order for faith leaders to effectively support displaced people, the trajectories, principles, and modalities of this type of assistance have largely been left underexplored (cf. Iqbal 2019; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Wilkinson and Kraft 2020). In this vein, my research is aligned with those scholars who have challenged ethnocentric understandings of social membership (Feldman 2012; Spaargaren et al. 2016), and I offer examples of how aid and justice are combined in a collective project for peace by thinking outside of mainstream humanitarianism. In fact, these types of support to displaced people, which are unusual for Global North-instigated aid agencies, explicitly combine social justice with humanitarian motivation.

## Methodological Note

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In this chapter, I focus on four Sunni refugee leaders from Syria, whose names have been pseudonymized, with the names of the specific places where they reside or have resided in the past omitted or referred to in vague terms, to protect their identities. This research is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with them over 2018 and 2019 in Lebanon, and remotely in Turkey during 2019 and in Sweden during 2020. Two of the faith leaders recently relocated from Lebanon to the two latter countries. These interviews were part of broader ethnographic work carried out in Beirut, Tripoli, and in diverse rural areas in northern Lebanon among Syrian refugees and aid providers from the so-called Global South, including refugee faith leaders. My approach to fieldwork has not entailed one-off data collection; instead, I have endeavored to collectively build an understanding of how humanitarian assistance, faith, peace, and justice merge in experiences of displacement. To do so, I have continuously relied on my interlocutors’ own accounts revolving around life anecdotes, assistance provision to displaced people from Syria, and concepts of religion, peace, and justice, which the four refugee faith leaders shared with me in several conversations over the last two years.

As I look exclusively at male faith leaders, some gender considerations are due in order to avoid framing religious leadership as exclusively masculine. In effect, the pool of faith leaders who have had to flee Syria is also becoming populated by Syrian women in the context of Turkey, where women have an active role in the Diyanet (Maritato 2018) (the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs, which considerably contributed to professionalizing the role of religious authorities in assistance provision). Exploring the role of refugee women in the Diyanet in future research may be an important heuristic way to challenge the enduring binary oppositional framing, which represents men, including faith leaders, as rational and able to act in a secular way in the public sphere, whereas women are irrational, religious, and emotional and, hence, unsuitable to cover official leadership roles (Bartelink and Wilson 2020: 47). With this in mind, it is notable that the burgeoning literature focusing on local faith leaders' roles in humanitarianism has primarily revolved around the involvement of male and citizen faith leaders in assistance provision. It is within these evolving debates that the present chapter makes a contribution, focusing on the roles of faith leaders who are themselves refugees.

## ***Rijal ad-Din in Syria***

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Large numbers of religious authority figures were displaced from the ongoing conflict in Syria, which started with a popular uprising in spring 2011. As a result of persecution, violence, and economic hardship, many of the faith leaders who were active in different geographic areas (e.g., mainly from northern and central Syria) relocated to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and—in smaller numbers—countries farther afield, such as Canada, Sweden, and Brazil. During my research on how refugee faith leaders engage in assistance provision, I particularly recognized their contribution to help refugees navigate healthcare precarity and facilitate their access to sanitary facilities in the receiving countries. Thus far, I have exclusively spoken to Syrian Sunni Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Building on my previous research on the anthropology of crisis management in Lebanon (Carpi 2014) and the role of faith-based organizations in Lebanon's emergency crises (Carpi 2017), the role of faith leaders from Syria in providing support sheds a revealing light on the impact of faith on the politics of aiding from the condition of displacement (Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020). By this token, I am interested in examining religious leaders' modalities of assistance vis-à-vis hegemonic humanitarian thinking and practices. Most refugee faith leaders from Syria do not yet have rights to mobility and have not achieved citizen or even legal status. This legal condition obviously implies that they are unable to become "itinerant humanitarians," as the global aid sector normally both calls for (Mostowlansky 2019: 237) and celebrates.

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

government wanted to ensure their support to the regime in order to face difficult geopolitical transformations. Pierret (2014: 4) especially mentions the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Conversely, Christian associations in Syria have historically had greater leverage, benefitting from strong networks with foreign religious organizations while being connected with international networks (Ruiz de Elvira 2015a: 134). Nonetheless, during Bashar al-Assad's mandate (2000–), the government reduced public expenses by outsourcing former state functions to local charities—where many faith leaders were involved—while keeping them under state surveillance (Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl 2014: 331). Importantly, as Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl incisively put it (2014: 335):

Under Hafiz al-Assad (1970–2000), these charity organizations drew at least some active—though controlled—popular participation but, under his son's rule, Syrians increasingly felt that being a member of these institutions brought few advantages. Previously, some citizens had reported their problems to the party or to mass organizations, hoping for help in the form of subsidies, reduced taxes, etc. In the late 2000s, they turned instead to their family networks, to private organizations, including charities, or to religious leaders.

The forced migration of Sunni faith leaders outside of Syria due to war in some ways enabled them to enhance their access to diversified funders and broader transnational networks, which reshuffled the domestic hierarchy of their respective social, political, and economic capital. This marks a diverse political economy of aid provision for refugee faith leaders from different religious groups in the receiving societies. During conflict, their intervention in the field of humanitarian action was partially made possible through generous international funding, which mostly came from countries that financially supported the various rebel factions (e.g., the Arab Gulf). However, as seen, prior to the 2011 popular uprising, Syrian faith leaders had already built sizeable social networks inside and outside of Syria, and yet their direct participation in aid provision remains underexplored. This was especially the case with faith leaders who promoted non-violent means of survival and resilience and who were cut out of resources—in contrast to those who were compliant with the regime or with rebel armed groups—and neglected in international debates. Indeed, Western-oriented debates, often happening in the context of international think-tanks influenced by US mainstream politics and security-focused agendas and in the international media, have mainly depicted Sunni groups as proponents of “radical Islam,” and they have often represented Syrian Christianity as indistinctly supporting the regime. Such biased external views on faith, conflict, and possibilities for dialogue impinged on the role of religion in contributing to edifying a justice-driven project. A decreasing focus in international debates on this potential role of religion is also due to how spaces of contestation changed throughout the Syrian uprising. In the first stage of the popular uprising, mosques represented safe spaces for Syrian opposition groups to gather and organize, while later, with the militarization of the opposition and governmental repression, mosques lost ground as key safe venues of mobilization and demonstration (Pierret 2012: 4), especially in the Syrian areas where my interlocutors come from.

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

less centralized (Kamrava 2018). In such a hybrid arena, Syrian faith leaders guiding smaller-scale faith communities, however, often act as effective community power brokers (Kamrava 2018: 113).

## The Multifold Role of Refugee Faith Leaders

I first met Sheikh Ahmed, who is from the village of al-Quseyr (in western Syria) in Halba, North Lebanon, where he was still serving as a spiritual guide in the informal tented settlement (ITS) where he and his family lived for four years. Sheikh Ahmed resettled to Sweden in 2017. Before then, he coordinated assistance provision to displaced families, especially in North Lebanon's ITS. ITS residents also used to turn to him with moral dilemmas regarding family planning as well as juridical matters. Sheikh 'Abdallah, originally from Homs in western Syria, used to run an Islamic school and a medium-sized mosque in a neighborhood largely inhabited by Syrian refugees in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. The school also served as a venue where Syrians could consult with him for moral and juridical issues, which were often related to legal stays in Lebanon or resettlement. He relocated to Turkey in 2018 after he was put under pressure by Lebanese authorities to shut down his Islamic school for Syrian graduates. Sheikh Radwan from Daraya (a town located in the southwest of the Syrian capital) has lived between Syria and Lebanon since 2004 and, with his wife, has managed an orphanage hosting thirty to thirty-five children and a large-sized mosque in a village in the Central Beqaa valley. Local people emblematically call these children "the Sheikh's children" — *wiled ash-sheikh*. Sheikh Mohammad from Ma'arrat an-Nu'man in the Idlib countryside (northwest Syria) relocated to Beirut in 2014 where he started working as a wall painter to secure his family's everyday livelihood but, today, he struggles to continue his spiritual and juridical mission as an Islamic scholar and thinker.

While these four faith leaders enjoy different levels of visibility in the Lebanese context and hold diverse political stances vis-à-vis a Syrian political future, the conflict, and its resolution, even though they all self-identify as opponents, they all voiced experiences of disenfranchisement. From their perspective, aid provision, in these circumstances, becomes a tool to rehabilitate their socio-spiritual role as *rijal ad-din* within displaced communities and, more broadly, in the receiving societies. This disenfranchisement not only derives from displacement but also from the public belief that leaving their country of origin belittles individual dignity, especially the dignity of people who have responded to the will of God to offer material and moral support to people stricken by war. This belief, expressed by the Arabic saying "*Man taraka darahu qallala miqdarahu*" — "Who left his home forcedly lessened his value" (Zaman 2017: 165) — largely influenced their state of being outside of Syria.

Sheikh Mohammad defined the role of *rijal ad-din* in moral and material assistance provision as threefold: *fatawa* (fatwas, a religious statement that disciplines public and private behaviors), *wijaha* (contextually interpretable as moral standing), and *wasata* (intermediation). He self-identifies as an aid intermediary, a role that he views as inherently associated with the need to gatekeep the religious message among displaced communities, confirming Kraft's study on evangelical churches in Lebanon (2016). In this sense, the four faith leaders all mentioned their roles as community-trusted aid and cash intermediaries. For instance, Sheikh Ahmed affirmed that he received up to 2,000 USD from private donors to provide assistance. Faith leaders normally rely on selected networks to distribute cash for rent, food, blankets, diesel for heaters, and medications to displaced people from Syria across Lebanon and in the region. When referrals to larger and structured providers failed, the faith leaders argued that they often stepped in to provide direct support to Syrian refugees with particular needs. For instance, Sheikh Radwan offered his home as a shelter to a Syrian widow with two children because her tent had been hit by a storm after she was denied hospitality in an INGO-run guest house to which he had referred her. Other refugees, similar to this Syrian widow, found it easier to seek out the immediate support of faith leaders. In this regard, social media is a frequent means of communication for refugees to reach out to faith leaders and search for their moral and material assistance.

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

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

In theory, there are 120 faith-based organizations operating in Lebanon, but none of them is presently working due to the lack of funds. This suggests that the situation of religious actors in general is not here at the moment, not only that of refugees [...]. But, of course, ours is peculiar: as a Syrian, I cannot open bank accounts in Lebanon and engage in coordinating aid as much as before. We Syrians often do unofficial religious gatherings in camps, but very rarely outside of those spaces. In camps, instead, we gather to read the Holy Qur’an, and we give *tajwid* classes [...]. Religion, after all, is not seen as a basic need. In the region, there’s no official commissioning (*taklif rasmi*) for religious leadership. As a Syrian, I cannot lead the Friday prayer (*khotbat al jum‘a*). The Lebanese Dar al-Fatwa<sup>3</sup> no longer issues the permission of religious acknowledgement (*bittaqaq ta‘rif dini*) to Syrians. In the past, the Dar used to issue these cards to facilitate Syrians to apply to UNHCR as refugees, but that didn’t entitle us to carry out religious tasks here [...]. I even struggle to pay my rent: how can my spiritual mission be my primary concern now? You see... forbidding us to deliver the Friday sermon is an attempt to incapacitate us in Lebanon. Don’t think it’s any easier for us as faith leaders to resettle elsewhere: we are not five-star refugees.

(Tripoli, March 21, 2018)

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

All of them mentioned that they sought to continue offering material and moral support to displaced families in displaced Syrian communities. By using their reputation and social status, they frequently managed to seek help for people in dire need, such as financial support to pay housing rents and surgical procedures that international humanitarian agencies do not easily address. These activities imply an unofficial and unstructured form of humanitarian work, largely occurring on an ad-hoc basis. This is particularly the case of Sheikh Mohammad in Beirut, who began to work in a new sector in Beirut to guarantee sustainable livelihoods for his family. The full-time job gradually prevented him from engaging

in remote forms of assistance. The difficult mobility of refugees inside Lebanon also acts as an impediment to making these networks of support viable and effective. Indeed, all of them mentioned their inability to leave their places of residence due to the large number of security checkpoints across the country and, for three of them, the impossibility of renewing their residence permits. Only Sheikh Ahmed, who resettled to Sweden, talked positively of his new migration as a reacquisition of his right to mobility. However, while some of his donors remained the same, his beneficiaries' networks changed as he started supporting displaced families in his new region.

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

## The Intersecting Space of Peace, Justice, and Humanitarianism

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In all of my encounters with these refugee faith leaders and in their accounts, peace, justice, and the coordination of assistance provision are all recurrent ideas that capture the way in which their socio-spiritual role is reconfigured in conditions of displacement. In order to undertake such processes, the four faith leaders pointed to the need of reflection and self-growth, which their condition of displacement triggers. As contemporary humanitarian discussions revolve around conceptual nexuses to discuss the necessary intertwining of practices, such as development, humanitarian assistance, and peace, on the basis of my experience working with these four refugee faith leaders, I propose a peace-justice-humanitarian nexus to capture the intersecting area in which these types of assistance emerge and evolve. An emblematic idea of justice-driven humanitarianism, where peacebuilding is a personal approach to assistance and an intimate involvement in just politics, was advanced by Sheikh Radwan. In the Friday sermon I attended in the village's mosque in March 2019, he emphasized that the UN Charter of Human Rights echoes the importance that rights have in Islamic thinking. He also stressed the importance of peace with the non-Muslim (*as-salam ma' gheir al-muslim*) and the importance of inner and individual peace (*salam adh-dhat*), which is the base for building collective peace. In his view, assisting people in need helps to materialize the justice project: which, as he describes it, is the first step toward moral redemption from war and governmental repression. With a different stance on the Syrian conflict and, therefore, hoping for a political future different from Sheikh Radwan's view, Sheikh Mohammad suggested a similar idea by demonstrating the importance of the "pacifist discourse" (*khitab silmi*) and of "dialogue" (*hiwar*), which are often unpopular among some of the *rijal ad-din* themselves and other segments of Syrian society: "Right now, in the Idlib countryside, there are one million armed people, keeping weapons at home, and anyone became able to do anything against each other. The militarization of the protest has not led to anything constructive" (Beirut, April 12, 2019). He contended that a justice-driven interpretation of political change undergirds the act of assisting others as working collectively toward justice-based peace.

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

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

## Religion as a Token of Political (Dis)empowerment

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

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

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

Due to heavy pressures from all sides, especially the extremist groups of my village—among whom, with sorrow, I could recognize many of my ex-classmates and friends who ended up

feeding the *da'eshiye* (ISIS-allied ideological orientation), we eventually had to merge with the General Organization of Muslim Scholars in Syria and, subsequently, with the Syrian Islamic Council that fully supported the Turkish approach to the Syrian conflict. In Lebanon, my security status did not change much. Repression is rampant right now: anything can happen to you as a Syrian, for no reason.

(March 30, 2019)

Sheikh Mohammad, a few weeks later, affirmed that “Syrians are seen in Lebanon as people who can only do manual work as I do. In Turkey, at least, I could have started an intellectual circle” (April 19, 2019), expressing his frustration about being unable to leave Lebanon. This is however not always the case. Due to his Islamic school activities, Sheikh ‘Abdallah risked deportation to Syria in 2019 before escaping to Turkey, where he resides now.

Unlike Sheikh ‘Abdallah, Sheikh Radwan believes that Syrian refugee faith leaders (and refugees in general) are not disempowered and attacked in Lebanon *because* they are Syrians; it is exclusively for economic benefits. He mentioned that the Lebanese army earns 50 USD from UNHCR to release every Syrian who is detained because they are undocumented—a piece of information that I never had the means to verify. By this token, during our visit to the local mayor, Sheikh Radwan asked me to take a picture of the two of them “as evidence of great Lebanese-Syrian good relationships in the village.” Although I was honestly surprised to witness the sway that the Syrian sheikh held even over some of his neighbors, I realized that his endeavor to shelter and protect Syrian, and sometimes Lebanese, children was positively perceived by local authorities as keeping poverty and orphanhood indoors, therefore making the unwanted invisible in the public space.

The lives of these refugee faith leaders are entangled in different local, governmental, and societal politics of visibility and invisibility. Although Sheikh Mohammad and Sheikh Ahmed decided to quit their spiritual mission to ensure their own and their families’ safety, Sheikh ‘Abdallah was temporarily able to emerge as a fundamental point of call for Syrian Sunni communities in Tripoli, running an Islamic school for Syrian graduates. His visibility, however, exposed him to major risks and eventually forced him out of the country. Sheikh Radwan instead affirmed that his own politics of visibility changed throughout the years he spent in the Beqaa village. While, in the first instance, he tried to make his orphanage visible on social media in order to raise funding, he later opted to render his activities invisible in order to protect the children and the resources he manages to collect. For example, he mentioned that when he decided to post pictures of some of the children for his fundraising campaigns, his Facebook account was hacked. The hacker raised money for the orphanage by using the pictures of the children, stating that the sheikh was unable to provide food to them and that the mosque was in the middle of nowhere. Instead, the mosque is located on the main road cutting across the Beqaa valley with several shops all around. The risks of making his activity public caused Sheikh Radwan to only rely on funding from his networks, such as his family in Turkey and donations from private individuals in Lebanon and in the region.

In line with scholars who have warned against a tacit marginalization and de-visibility of religion from the public humanitarian arena (Ager and Ager 2015), these are also self-initiated processes that refugees undertake as the only possible instrument of individual and collective protection (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) or as the only viable way of gaining and preserving international support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). In the cases discussed, the invisibilization of religion appears as a modality of refugee governance that is meant to disempower refugees in host states, especially from a political perspective. As a result, all attempts to make religious assistance visible ended up being jeopardized, and they limited the faith leaders’ possibility of providing assistance to displaced Syrian communities. Nonetheless, during conflict, aid provision became a fruitful field through which to restore or generate resourcefulness among some Syrian refugees. According to Sheikh ‘Abdallah and Sheikh Radwan,

this, at times, induced mid-age Syrian refugee men to cozen aid agencies by impersonating religious leaders in order to access resources.

## Conclusion

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

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

On the one hand, religiously motivated acts of assistance, meant to collaboratively pave the way to justice and peace, can reinforce social struggles against structural hardships, such as poverty and lack of access to basic services. On the other hand, the identity, experience, and the capacities for justice and for peace of refugee faith leadership risk fading away with their desire to bring moral and material rehabilitation into the life of the displaced. In this chapter, I have pointed to the importance of exploring this emerging intersecting space of peace, justice, and humanitarian assistance by using indigenous epistemological tools, rather than venturing into tiring judgments on whether politics and religion can get along well in the semantics of humanitarianism.

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## Notes

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- 2 In future research, I plan to also focus on Orthodox Christian refugee faith leaders from Syria.
- 3 Dar al-Fatwa (or Dar al-Ifta') is Lebanon's Sunni authority. In more detail, it is a government institution created in 1922 that legally rules the Sunni community by administering religious schools, resolving disputes of several types, and overseeing mosques.