

Transregional Responses to Displacement: Aid, Advocacy and Accountability

Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London

This Research Note explores **diverse transregional responses to displacement**, focusing primarily on responses to **displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye**, as well as **historical and contemporary responses** in the **broader Middle East, including in relation to Gaza**. The Note draws on insights from the SOURCED project, which conducted research with over 600 refugees from Syria, long-term residents in host communities, and representatives of various international, national and local organizations in Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye between 2017 - 2025. The research highlights **the importance of paying greater attention to transregional responses developed by states and organizations from across the so-called ‘global South,’** noting that these initiatives often reflect **long histories of support that go beyond financial or material donations**. This Research Note summarises the findings of a Full Research Report titled *‘Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye and beyond.* Read more at www.southernresponses.org.

Southern Responses to Displacement

By the end of 2024, over 6.2 million refugees from Syria had fled the country, with the majority in Türkiye (c. 2.8 million), Lebanon (c. 1 million), and Jordan (564,000). Additionally, there were approximately 7.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) within Syria by early 2025. Since 2011, various **emergency aid programmes** have been implemented by **UN agencies, donor states from the ‘global North,’** and **diverse actors from the ‘global South.’** While regional responders, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council states, have received extensive attention, **transregional responses have been less studied**. This Research Note and the longer report it draws on, focuses on **responses from Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, and Malaysia**. In so doing, the project maps a wide range of **transregional responses to conflict and displacement** from states with **varying levels of income and geopolitical power**. These responses encompass **more than just financial or material aid**, including:

Provision of **aid and services**.

Support for local and refugee-led organizations through collaborative and flexible processes (e.g. as identified by refugees from Syria in relation to support offered by Japanese, South Korean and Malaysian donors and NGOs).

Providing **pathways to asylum, resettlement, or educational migration** (e.g., Brazil's humanitarian visas, Cuba's educational migration programme, Malaysia's relocation programme and educational sponsorships) to enable access to protection and to foster self-sufficiency on individual, collective and national levels.

Engaging in **legal and political advocacy** to uphold international law and principles of protection (e.g., South Africa's ICJ case, The Hague Group).

The research thus emphasizes the importance of recognizing not only the quantity of aid provided, but also the **quality and ‘unquantifiable’ nature of many such responses**, as well as ‘non-traditional modes of response’ that go **beyond the roles of traditional donors or host states**. Addressing the **“knowledge gaps”** and **“trust gaps”**

surrounding these diverse transregional actors is crucial for **increasing recognition and supporting the diversification of both donors and forms of response**, ultimately **prioritizing the protection needs of people affected by conflict and displacement**.

Transregional Responses to Displacement In and From Syria

Refugees from Syria received **aid from local, regional, and transregional actors both within and outside Syria**. Initially, responses within Syria included **mutual support** from other people, with individuals and community members being **“first responders.”** Over time, a wider variety of responders, including **“Southern service providers,”** became active within Syria. After crossing borders, regional and transregional actors provided direct assistance, channelled resources to host governments or NGOs, and supported community-based groups. Notably, some donors, particularly from the Gulf and Malaysia, were described as **interfering less than Northern donors** in the work of refugee-led groups, offering **more flexibility and freedom in decision-making** for locally-based aid providers.

“We have a lot of Arab donors mainly from the Gulf and we also have three Malaysian donors. The nice thing about them is that they don’t interfere in our work like the Northern donors do which gives us freedom to make decisions related to the services we provide. They are more flexible, and they don’t restrict us only to their vision. It makes the projects with them more comfortable and flexible.”

Syrian refugee from Damascus who was working in an NGO in Türkiye

Despite the presence of a diverse range of responders, there were **varying degrees of awareness and knowledge** among interlocutors regarding the roles played by different states. Some **long-standing actors**, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, were **not widely recognized for their contributions**, highlighting a significant finding of the SOURCED project. The **“unintentional disregard”** for the service roles played by Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia was noted by a Palestinian refugee in Northern Lebanon, who attributed this lack of knowledge in part to **a lack of overt logos and media promotion by these countries**. Filling this “knowledge gap” is important, especially as states from the global North have been **increasingly cutting aid**, and this will potentially lead to an increasing **diversification of aid providers**. While some individuals were aware of the historical roles of countries like Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Qatar, Venezuela, Brazil, and Cuba, many others demonstrated a lack of knowledge about their ongoing activities.

The report includes specific **Spotlights** on transregional responses, which are summarised in the boxes below:

Spotlight on Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

Actors from **Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan** emerged in the research as providing **material and programmatic aid and support for local, community-led organizations** in response to both Syrian displacement and earthquakes in Türkiye. They also shared **expertise and knowledge regarding disaster management**.

Japan was frequently mentioned as a significant contributor, with Japanese NGOs like AAR Japan providing in-kind and financial aid and tailored services. Japanese NGOs were noted for their professionalism and collaboration with local and Syrian-led NGOs.

South Korean organizations were recognized for substantial contributions, particularly after the earthquake in Türkiye, offering comprehensive support in education, health, and infrastructure, often partnering with local actors. Korean aid in Jordan included establishing tents in Za’atari camp, leading to areas being called “Korean villages.” Japanese (JICA) and Korean (KOICA) cooperation agencies were identified as becoming increasingly more active donors in displacement contexts.

Cooperation with organizations from Japan and Korea was often described as **collaborative and flexible**. However, some individuals noted that **religious and cultural differences** had occasionally hindered collaboration with what they referred to as “Asian organizations.”

In contrast, a **Taiwanese organization** was viewed positively by a Syrian aid provider due to perceived religious and cultural alignment.

Spotlight on Brazil and Cuba

These countries have provided **transregional modes of assistance that prioritize pathways to asylum, protection and educational migration**.

Brazil’s response to the Syrian conflict included funding aid in the Middle East and a **transregional solidarity resettlement programme** through providing people with humanitarian visas to travel to Brazil in order to apply for asylum upon arrival. Between 2007 and 2017, **2,771 Syrian nationals arrived in Brazil with humanitarian visas**, becoming **eligible for refugee status after arriving there**; Syrians became the largest percentage of refugees in the country. Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh refer to this visa scheme – which was extended to Palestinians from Syria - as an “**alternative politics of care**” compared to providing aid only in the region of conflict.¹ Many Syrians applying for this visa were still living inside Syria, motivated by concerns for safety, the desire to work in their field, or to achieve legal and financial sustainability they felt was impossible in the region. These initiatives build on historical migration ties between the Middle East and South America. Brazil also contributes to the UNIFIL peace-keeping force in Southern Lebanon.

Cuba’s responses are longer-standing but less explored than Brazil’s responses. While not offering asylum, Cuba’s **transnational educational migration programme** since the 1970s has provided **secondary and tertiary education to refugee youth**, including from the Middle East and North Africa. This approach, aimed at developing communal and national forms of self-sufficiency, is an example of transnational programmes going beyond emergency response. Although rarely mentioned in this specific research project, the concept of providing opportunities for professional development through education and work outside the country of origin was highly valued by many interlocutors. A Palestinian representative referred to the historical assistance offered by countries like Libya, Kuwait, and Cuba (1970-1990), which included study grants and work contracts, highlighting this is “the best way to provide assistance to the afflicted peoples.” This demonstrates the **diversity of responses which can be framed as modalities of South-South cooperation**, ranging from material aid and work opportunities in oil-rich states to educational programmes from a country under embargo. Cuban scholarship programmes have significant legacies, with Syrian and Palestinian doctors trained in Cuba providing medical assistance to displaced people in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza today.

¹ References: Carpi, E. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) ‘Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Brazil: A Viable Alternative Strategy to Aid?’, *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 6 (1): 13-23.

Spotlight on South Africa and The Hague Group

From the perspective of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, it is crucial to **prioritize “security and safety”** through opportunities for **asylum and resettlement**, as well as engaging on the **“advocacy level and political level”** to find solutions. Refugees stressed that **legal and political responses** are often **more important than material aid**. This highlights the importance of the **quality and ‘unquantifiable’ nature of responses** beyond financial support.

Against the backdrop of some Northern states cutting aid and seeking to dismantle humanitarian agencies, other states have sought to **hold accountable those committing or complicit in crimes under international law**, particularly in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. States from the ‘global South’ have been prominent in **leading international responses to uphold the rights of displaced Palestinians**.

Most notably, **South Africa initiated a genocide case against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2023**, seeking provisional measures to protect Palestinians in Gaza. South Africa has been supported in this legal case by numerous countries, many identifying as ‘Southern’ or ‘postcolonial’ states, such as Nicaragua, Colombia, Türkiye, Libya, Egypt, Maldives, Mexico, Chile, and Cuba. By January 2025, this momentum led to the **inauguration of The Hague Group**, founded by Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa; the Group is committed to upholding the rule of law, international law, justice, UN resolutions, ICJ rulings, and ICC arrest warrants.

These actions demonstrate how **transregional cooperation** can be mobilized to **uphold international humanitarian law and hold states accountable**. Many states involved in these legal and diplomatic initiatives are not traditionally seen as ‘donor states’ but **collaborate based on cross-cutting principles rather than geographical proximity**.

Spotlight on Malaysian and Indonesian Responses

Malaysia’s and Indonesia’s roles in response to the genocide in Gaza are bringing their long-standing initiatives into **greater international focus**, although they have often been marginalized in academic and popular knowledge.

Malaysian responses, both through the **state and state-supported NGOs**, include a wide range of initiatives for refugees in the Middle East. In Lebanon, institutions like the **Beit Atfal Assumoud Community Centre**, historically supported by Malaysia, provide **educational, financial, social, cultural, and medical assistance to Syrian and Palestinian refugees**. Malaysia’s support includes **sponsorship programmes for refugees’ education**. This support for Syrian refugees builds on a long history of supporting Palestinian refugees. However, this history is **not always known by recent arrivals** or even long-term residents, with some confusing Malaysian-supported initiatives with those funded by Northern organizations like UNDP due to the visibility of their logos.

Malaysia's sponsorship programmes for Palestinians also extend to Gaza, including the **"Sponsor a Palestinian Child in Gaza" program** and funding for school facilities. Malaysian NGOs like Aman Palestin are also active in providing **humanitarian protection in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon**. Beyond assistance in the region, Malaysia has facilitated **travel and relocation for Syrian and Palestinian refugees to Malaysia**. This included **visa-free entry for Syrians** after 2016 (although with significant cost and settlement challenges) and a state-sponsored **'temporary relocation programme'** for 3,000 Syrian refugees from 2015 onwards, providing accommodation and temporary residency. Malaysia has also facilitated **international travel for Palestinian refugees**, primarily for educational purposes, through sponsorship and fostering programmes since 1988, including **university scholarships**. This demonstrates a long history of support both in the Middle East and in Malaysia itself.

Indonesia's roles also involve **intertwined state and non-state responses**. Indonesia has provided **material assistance** to IDPs within Syria and refugees in Lebanon, including direct donations and **flexible support** for local organizations. Indonesia is the **largest provider of peacekeepers to UNIFIL** in Southern Lebanon. Indonesia's **financial support** for UNRWA has significantly increased since 2008, becoming its 35th largest donor by 2023, with commitments to further increase contributions. Indonesia has also committed to increasing its contribution to the ICRC.

In response to the situation in Gaza, the Indonesian state has provided aid, including **shipments of food, medical supplies, and tents**. Indonesia also sent a **hospital ship with aid for Gaza**, hoping it could operate as a **field hospital**. Indonesian civil society, through organizations like MER-C, co-funded the **Indonesian Hospital in Gaza City**. Indonesian medical volunteers have remained in Gaza alongside Palestinian doctors, including Palestinian doctors educated in Cuba, providing care. Medical teams in Gaza often demonstrate the **intertwining of 'Southern' and 'Northern' institutions**.

The Full Report notes that the apparent **invisibility of actors like Malaysia and Indonesia** is partly due to their **discrete mode of aid provision**, which Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has described elsewhere as the "poetics of undisclosed care." Unlike Northern donors whose logos are often hypervisible (as critiqued by displaced people), **support from Malaysia and Indonesia often lacks visible markers**, meaning that only those familiar with the history of such responses are aware of it.

While the **critique of visible donor branding** is valid, the Full Report notes **potential risks of "invisible" aid**, as a lack of awareness about the track record of states like Malaysia and Indonesia may lead to their interventions being viewed as 'new' and decontextualized as their roles increase. **Filling this "knowledge gap" is essential to also address a potential "trust gap."**

Conclusion

The SOURCED project offers a compelling vision of **transregional solidarity that transcends regional blocs and geopolitical binaries**. Countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Brazil, and Cuba have demonstrated **models of humanitarianism that prioritize education, legal protection, and the need for political solutions to conflict and displacement situations**. These responses are often grounded in **shared histories** of struggle, anti-colonial solidarity, and commitments to international law.

The project also highlights the growing role of Southern states in **global advocacy**. The leadership of South Africa and others in international legal forums such as The Hague Group signals **a shift toward a more multipolar order**, where Southern states assert their agency not only as donors or hosts but as **normative actors shaping global responses to displacement and conflict**. This transregional approach offers a **powerful counter-narrative** to the dominant Eurocentric paradigm. It suggests that meaningful responses to displacement must **go beyond emergency aid** to

include structural change, legal accountability, and the creation of pathways to safety, dignity, and self-sufficiency on individual, collective and national levels alike.

Ultimately, the SOURCED project calls for a reimagining of humanitarianism that **centres the experiences, conceptualisations and priorities of displaced people themselves**. Refugees are not passive recipients of aid but active agents who **evaluate, critique, and shape the responses they both receive and themselves provide**. Their insights and critiques reveal the **limitations of current models and point toward more inclusive, equitable, and effective forms of response**.

This includes recognizing the **value of informal, community-based aid**; addressing the “**trust gap**” alongside the funding gap; and ensuring that aid is **delivered in ways that uphold dignity, respect, and agency**. It also requires a **commitment to political solutions, legal protections and the expansion of asylum and resettlement opportunities**.

In a world where displacement is increasingly protracted and politicized, the lessons of the SOURCED project are both urgent and transformative. They remind us that **humanitarianism is not a fixed set of practices or actors but a dynamic field shaped by history, power, and the everyday struggles** of those most affected by conflict and displacement. By listening to and learning from the past and present of Southern responses, we can begin to build more just and responsive systems that truly reflect the needs, rights and aspirations of displaced people around the world.

Background: This Research Note is based on the *Analysing South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye* research project (SOURCED led by Principal Investigator Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh at University College London, which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 715582). Visit www.southernresponses.org.

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Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Project Reports

Research Reports:

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye and beyond: Full Report* (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit: UCL)

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) [Transregional Responses to Displacement: Aid, Advocacy and Accountability: Research Report](#) (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit, UCL). In Arabic [here](#).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) [South-South Cooperation: Diplomatic and Humanitarian Responses to Conflict and Displacement: Workshop Report](#) (SOURCED project, Migration Research Unit, UCL and Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, CHS)

Research and Policy Notes

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) [Meanings of the South and Refugees’ Views and Critiques of Southern Responses to Displacement: Research Note #1](#) (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit, UCL)

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Elkahlout, G. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *South-South Cooperation: Diplomatic and Humanitarian Responses to Conflict and Displacement: Policy Brief* (SOURCED project, Migration Research Unit, UCL and Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, CHS)

