

## REGIONAL APPROACHES: MIDDLE EAST

### Regional Approaches to Displacement in the Middle East<sup>47</sup>

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The Middle East is home to a significant number of displaced people including refugees who are under the mandate of the bifurcated International Refugee Regime, that is to say, across the mandates of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). According to UNHCR's planning figures for the Middle East and North Africa for 2022, of a total of 16 million forcibly displaced and stateless people in the region, 12.5 million were internally displaced (78% of the total), while 2.5 million (15% of the total) were refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). All refugees in the region, except for Palestinians, fall under the mandate of UNHCR; in turn, 5.8 million Palestinian refugees are under UNRWA's mandate, and are consistently excluded from the so-called "global" refugee agency's statistics.

Against this backdrop, major challenges are faced by displaced people in the Middle East, the vast majority of whom do not hold official refugee status. Displaced people have varying levels of access to different forms of assistance, services, and resources, including those provided by a significantly underfunded UN system. In 2021, the UNHCR asserted that "Funding needs in the Middle East and North Africa were the largest among UNHCR's seven region [...] and the most underfunded" (UNHCR, 2022a). In spite of being so significantly underfunded, UNHCR is also solely responsible for undertaking refugee status determination (RSD) in the Middle East and North African Region, doing so in seventeen countries in 2021 (UNHCR, 2021).

Notably, the very definition of the 'Middle East' as a region is problematized when we note that the UNHCR not only assesses asylum claims in relation to the

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1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, but also, in the context of those countries which have ratified the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention, including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, also according to the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in *Africa* (emphasis added). This bifurcated (UNHCR-UNRWA), or even trifurcated (if we also consider the OAU Convention) system leads to a very uneven hierarchy of protection, for those people who have international protection at all. In such contexts, refugees granted status under the 1951 Geneva Convention may be eligible for different forms of aid and support (although they may not always be able to access these), and also potentially have access to durable solutions such as resettlement to a third country; in contrast, these are not available either to Palestinian refugees, or indeed to those people granted refugee status under the OAU Convention.

Acknowledging this, if only briefly, helps to disrupt the assumption that there is actually such a thing as a region *per se*. Instead, we need to recognize not only that there are different ways of conceptualizing and framing different spaces and people, but also that these different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between territory, regional descriptors and the people who inhabit these territories change over time and space. For instance, we can recognize that a variety of different frames, such as *Mashreq*, the *Maghreb* and the *Gulf*, are also used within the “region” (using that term very loosely), depending on different institutional and geopolitical concerns.

Indeed, a critical approach to regions advocates for a move away from fixed and static conceptualizations; away from “the mainstream approach [which] views regions as homogenous, static blocs of (nation-)states territorially bounded and demarcated by the member states’ borders” and instead towards a more *relational* approach, recognizing “the importance of relational ontologies and of focusing on “transnational processes and relations among political and social forces (state and non-state actors) in the construction and reconstruction of regions in/through space/time” (MUHR, 2019, p. 96). This suggests the need to apply critical and theoretical insights and critical methodologies to challenge ‘mainstream’ forms of knowledge, including how a particular territory and their inhabitants are ‘imagined’ and analyzed (also see CARPI; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2020b).

This is pertinent in the context of today’s presentation, insofar as Orientalist modes of analyses (see SAID, 1978), for example, deeply influence the way as in which the Middle East has been viewed, represented, and discursively constituted as a ‘refugee producing region’, as a ‘host’ region and as a ‘region of origin.’ While beyond the scope of this brief discussion, a range of key dynamics to be aware of is how the region is variously romanticized and exoticized (for instance, as a space of organic hospitality), or vilified (constituted as inherently violent and patriarchal, for instance), and how ideologically-driven assumptions around (for instance) religion, culture, gender and sexuality are mobilized in analyses of conflict and displacement, and

indeed in asylum-claims and humanitarian campaigns alike (*i.e.* see AKRAM, 2000; ABU-LUGHOD, 2002; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2014a; 2014b; 2016a).

With this short introduction in mind, I will now briefly turn to two of my research projects - “Southern Responses to Displacement”<sup>49</sup> and “Refugee Hosts”<sup>50</sup> – which, since 2016, have been examining how, why and with what effect different actors from the so-called Global South are responding to displacement from Syria in countries including Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Amongst other things, in my research I argued that displacement from Syria and responses to this must be viewed *in relation to*, rather than *in isolation from*, other refugees’ situations and processes of both mobility and immobility (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2016b; 2018a; 2019c; 2019a; 2020b). Not only do the people who have been displaced from Syria – Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis and Kurds alike – themselves have complex histories of migration, mobility and displacement, but they have often been ‘hosted’ by people who have equally complex histories of (forced) migration and immobility, including people whom I refer to as ‘refugee hosts’ (2016b; 2018a; 2019c; 2019a; 2020b). My research starts from the premise that responses to displacement from Syria must be viewed in relation to these complex histories of displacement, migration and hosting; it also takes a multiscalar approach to examine responses to displacement from Syria, including by ‘regional’ actors, ‘host’ states, ‘Southern’ donor states, diaspora organisations, local and transnational faith communities, and refugees themselves (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a; 2021).

In the rest of the presentation, I will situate the focus on ‘regional responses’ to displacement within the context of the so-called Localisation of Aid Agenda, arguing that a study of ‘Southern’ responses to displacement can be helpful precisely because it enables a multiscalar approach which is attentive to multiple directionalities and spatialities of response – both ‘local’ and also transnational – within and across different ‘regions’ (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a).

The localization of aid agenda has led to increasing recognition of the roles played by local actors in responding to displacement. ‘Local’ in this context obviously refers to regional, national, sub-national actors but is also a term that has often been used as a synonym for Southern actors. Especially following the 2015 World Humanitarian Summit, the so-called “international community” has increasingly officially offered support to national and municipal actors, with diverse funding commitments having been made at this stage by different donors (see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a). This commitment promised to offer an alternative approach to what we can identify as hegemonic directionalities of aid – which have traditionally been driven

<sup>49</sup> Funded by the ERC **under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation agreement no. 715582**, the full title of the project is ‘Analysing South-South Humanitarian Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey’ (2017-2024) – see [www.southernresponses.org](http://www.southernresponses.org).

<sup>50</sup> Funded by the AHRC-ESRC, the Refugee Hosts project’s full title is ‘Local Community Experiences of and Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey’, running between 2016-2022 – see [www.refugeehosts.org](http://www.refugeehosts.org).

by North to South movements of money, aid and humanitarian ‘experts’ alike - and more attention to locally driven, South-South forms of humanitarianism (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a).

One particular form of regional response which has been repeatedly heralded by the UN is the UN’s Syria Regional Refugee Resilience Plan, the ‘3RP’, which, according to the UNHCR’s latest report in 2021 “remained the cornerstone of support for 5.7 million Syrian refugees and their host governments” (UNHCR, 2022b). As an aside, I would take issue with this sole reference to “Syrian refugees,” since refugees *from* Syria are not solely Syrian nationals: they also include Palestinians, Iraqis and Kurds who previously lived in Syria, were displaced from Syria and should also be considered within responses to the displacement caused by the ongoing conflicts in Syria (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a).

Importantly, since its launch in 2014, UN documentation has repeatedly and consistently used the term ‘paradigm shift’ to describe the 3RP (*i.e.* 3RP, 2014). Notably, the extent to which the Plan embodies a ‘paradigm shift’ is highlighted as one of the “key messages” and “topline messages” that officials are meant to widely share when discussing the Plan (see 3RP, 2017). It is presented as being innovative – indeed, “a UN first” – as follows:

The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) is a UN first. It represents a paradigm shift in the response to the [Syrian] crisis by combining humanitarian and development capacities, innovation and resources (3RP, 2015, p. 6).

The 3RP has thus been presented as demonstrating the ‘international community’s’ commitment both of ‘forward-looking’ policies and programmes and of supporting national and regional actors in the global South, embodying a “paradigm shift” to a “nationally-led, regionally coherent strategy” (3RP, 2014), which “aims to combine humanitarian assistance with development and resilience of host countries” (ILO, 2015).

However, elsewhere in my work (*i.e.* FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019a) I have argued that repeatedly framing and messaging this as a “paradigm shift” and a “UN first” does not of course render this plan a paradigm shift in itself. Indeed, even the briefest analysis of the long history of the humanitarian-development continuum demonstrates significant continuities, rather than the dramatic shift declared by the UN: there is a long history of programmes based on ‘humanitarian-development continuum’; of forward-looking, capacity-building responses; and of regional and national responses (see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019b). Equally, there is a long history of both past successes and failures, including the cooptation of ‘local’ actors and political failures (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019b; 2018c). This is not to say that the approach is not a welcome one (if it were to be implemented with appropriate funding), and the 3RP has consistently centralised the importance of mainstreaming support for local municipalities and institutions into various programming activities

to maximise positive outcomes and experiences amongst refugee *and* host communities alike in the Middle East. This is important because the existing evidence confirms that regional, national and municipal level actions and coordination *are* key to responses to different forms of disasters (*i.e.* FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019b). However, evidence also confirms that appropriate levels of funding and localised modes of partnership do not result from official assertions and commitments.

A further critique of the localization framework is that although national and regional responses are often equated with 'localised responses', there is also a need to move towards a localization agenda that is even more 'local' in nature: focusing on individuals, communities and neighbourhoods, alongside other national and sub-national actors, not just as 'experiencing' and being affected by displacement, but also as responding to this in different ways (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2015; 2016b; 2018b; 2019b; 2020a; 2021). Equally, the localization framework risks reproducing methodological nationalism and (dis)missing *a priori* the multi-scalar and multi-directional forms of response that have long been taking place in displacement situations. That is to say, that it seems essential to view 'regions' and 'regional responses' relationally, rather than as geographically bounded modes of response.

I will return to this relational approach shortly, but first I will turn to some regional and national level examples of 'Southern' responses to displacement from Syria. In 2012 alone, the Arab League pledged \$100M in aid to Syrian refugees and MENA States' responses have included not only policies developed by 'host States' but also diverse forms of significant humanitarian assistance: the Moroccan government, for example, sent aid convoys to establish a field hospital in Jordan in 2012 and the Qatar Charity provided food and non-food aid and medical assistance for Syrian refugees both in Lebanese border areas and in Jordan. Regional actors and regional States have thus been responding in different ways, and a question that has often arisen is *why* regional responses may have been developed. Noting that there are many different reasons 'why' regional responses may be developed - the League of Arab States, for instance, founded its Humanitarian Aid Section in 2007 with "the aim of consolidating *joint social Arab action* for the *interest of the Member States*"<sup>51</sup> - such questions must, of course, also be asked of Northern States and the UN: whose interests are prioritised, and what principles are mobilised (for instance, political and ideological), but also who defines 'humanitarian' and how does the humanitarian *relate* to the political, ideological, faith-based etc. These are some of the questions that the Southern Responses to Displacement and Refugee Hosts projects have been examining.

Less institutionalized and non-State-led responses are also receiving increasing recognition. Commentators have, from the onset of the conflict, argued that civil society groups have, in fact, been the most significant actors supporting refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (*i.e.* IRIN, 2012; GATTEN; ALABASTER,

<sup>51</sup> See <http://www.lasportal.org/en/secretarygeneral/Pages/PoliticalAffairs.aspx#tab1>.

2012; SVOBODA; PANTULIANO, 2015). These initiatives have included local faith-based organizations and local faith communities delivering aid and providing spiritual support to refugees from Syria (REFUGEE HOSTS, 2018; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH et al., 2020; CARPI; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2020b); and diverse forms of what I conceptualise as ‘refugee-refugee humanitarianism,’ including protracted Palestinian refugees offering support to ‘new’ refugees seeking sanctuary in Lebanon (see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2015a; 2015b; 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2019b; 2020a; 2021; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH; QASMIYEH, 2017). Research, including that conducted through the Southern Responses to Displacement and Refugee Hosts projects, has carefully documenting very clear examples of localized forms of response by local, municipal, civil society, faith-community-led and refugee-led responses. However, there have also been significant responses from beyond the region, including Brazil’s resettlement program for Palestinian refugees (see VERA-ESPINOZA, 2019b; 2019a). Actors from across many other regions have likewise been developing policies and programs that have been implemented within the Middle East and/or in support of refugees from the Middle East. Under-documented examples include Malaysia’s role in supporting Palestinian refugees since the 1990s and refugees from Syria since 2011, including through having financed the establishment of the Beit Atfal Assomoud Centre in Baddawi camp in Northern Lebanon where I have conducted a lot of my research (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH; PACITTO, 2015). There is also a long history of transregional educational and scholarship programs for refugees, including scholarships provided by the Malaysian government for Palestinians from Baddawi camp and also from Gaza to study in Malaysia. As I have explored in earlier parts of my work, Palestinian refugees, as well as Sahrawi refugees from the non-self-governing territory of the Western Sahara have received different forms of support from countries including Libya and Cuba (i.e. FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2012; 2015a). A focus on Cuba reminds us of the complex legacies of a transregional scholarship programme for refugees from the Middle East and North Africa: since the 1950s, students from across the Middle East and North Africa have left their home-camps or places of origin to study in Cuba through a fully paid for educational scholarship program, with the vast majority of these young people graduating as medical practitioners from Cuban universities; in turn, the medical practitioners who have been treating Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Kurds, amongst others who have been displaced from Syria since 2012, precisely include Palestinians, and indeed Syrians, who studied in Cuba (see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019b). In this case, a transregional scholarship programme for refugees has enabled what I refer to elsewhere as refugee-refugee humanitarianism.

By means of conclusion, I would like to return to my proposal that a focus on Southern-led responses to conflict-induced – rather than a focus on ‘regional,’ ‘national’ or ‘local’ responses – enables us to examine both the multiplicity of *State*-led responses *and* community-based responses, and to view these in relation to other modes

of response and discourses. By examining both formal and informal, and State- and community-led responses in relation to the localisation of aid agenda, I would argue that there is more need for further research into the diverse modalities, spatialities, directionalities, relationalities and conceptualisations of Southern-led responses to displacement in and beyond particular ‘regions’ (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2019b).

A number of key implications arise from this brief discussion, including, firstly, the importance of using critical socio-spatial modes of analysis when discussing ‘regions’ and ‘regional projects.’ Secondly, there is an urgent need to be critically attentive to why and how UN agencies and the international community are interested in promoting regional solutions for refugees. While this may be more ‘efficient’, some analytical frames would lead us to engage critically with the instrumentalization of ‘Southern’ actors; attempts to shift responsibilities away from the UN and Northern states (many of whom are former colonial powers) without sharing and providing promised funding and resources; and promoting the continuation of a particular form of North-South relations. Indeed, at particular historical and geopolitical moments, certain Southern actors, including States and regional organizations, have been actively mobilized and some would say instrumentalized by the international humanitarian community. It is against this backdrop that there has been an equally long-standing history of actors from across the Global South resisting, rejecting, and developing alternatives to the hegemonic aid system (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2015; 2019b; 2021). Southern-led responses to displacement, including those that can be analysed through the lens of South-South cooperation, have been developed as a means of resisting the process of institutionalizing ‘Southern’ actors ‘into’ the pre-existing paradigm and parameters established by the Northern-led ‘international system’ (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2018b; 2019b; 2021). With regards to the displacement of people from Syria since 2012, this process has been clear in so far as certain regional and national level actors have been incorporated into the international aid system as part of a localization of aid agenda, while community- and neighborhood-level responses, for example, have continued to be marginalized and excluded, including those developed by refugees themselves (FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2018b; 2019b; 2021).

Thirdly, in spite of the discussive framing of the 3RP in the context of the Middle East, we need to be wary of and indeed reject notions of “paradigm shifts”, instead developing historically- and spatially-situated analyses that document and examine how different actors around the world have responded in specific contexts of displacement. This must include ensuring that analyses of contemporary forms of response are situated within the longer history of different forms of response across time and space.

Fourthly, just as we examine the role of distance in the discourses and policies of European countries which position refugees in the Global South as worthy of receiving humanitarian assistance “over there” while framing refugees who try to reach European borders and territories as being unworthy of legal protection (FIDDIAN-

-QASMIYEH, 2016b), we also need to consider how States and regions labeled as South American, Caribbean, African or Middle East or Asia for example not to only act *within* their own States and regions but also *beyond* the confines of the geographic region itself (also see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH *et al.*, 2020). Such an approach would also be aligned with calls within the academy to de-exceptionalize studies of specific regions (*contra* ‘area studies’), by exploring the connections that exist between different parts of the world.

Finally, beyond a focus on documenting “refugee experiences” and even beyond the long overdue acknowledgement of the ways that refugees themselves respond to development and to displacement, I argue that there is particular urgency to explore how different forms and directionalities of response – whether on local, national, regional or transregional levels - are *conceptualized* and *negotiated* by refugees themselves (see FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, 2015a; 2019a, 2019c; 2020a, QASMIYEH, 2020).

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## REGIONAL APPROACHES: NORTH AMERICA

### **Slamming the Door on the Down Low: Tactics to Include a Few and Exclude A slew of displaced persons in North America**

*Jennifer Hyndman*<sup>52</sup>

To begin, I would like to thank you Liliana, thank you Melissa, thank you João for chairing and for the invitation to be here. It is bittersweet that we cannot be together, but also inspiring that we can be here from locations in the Middle East, North America and Australia. I love this conference and I see many of you in the zoom participant list with whom I have had a chance to have coffee with at these meetings over the years. I am missing you, but I am very grateful to have this opportunity to give you a brief keynote talk.

As you can see, I have amended my title slightly, but let me just get going as I

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