

## Review

# The Politics of Crisis-Making. Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon

Estella Carpi, Bloomington, Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 2023.  
224 pp. £48.27/\$65.00. ISBN 0253066395.

Estella Carpi's book *The Politics of Crisis-Making. Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon* offers a timely exploration of chronic crises and refugee influxes in Lebanon. Given the reignited conflict in the Middle East and the lack of any foreseeable resolution, the book is bound to become essential reading for scholars, policymakers, and humanitarian workers seeking insight into the region. Moreover, as I will elaborate later, the arguments and observations in the book hold relevance beyond Lebanon, offering critical perspectives on humanitarian systems and interventions in need of urgent reform.

The central focus of this book is on humanitarianism, which the author argues is deeply politicized and shapes social, political, and moral divisions within society, rather than simply mirroring them. The book is a wakeup call for humanitarians. It underscores the importance of comprehending how humanitarian interventions shape social relationships and everyday life of the receiving communities. The main argument of the book is that crisis discourse, rather than the crises themselves, drives these divisions and perpetuates violence, thereby maintaining the status quo, if not exacerbating it.

The book opens with a compelling testimony from Wael, a Syrian refugee in his forties, who resides in a tent on rented land in Lebanon (Carpi 2023: 2). Born to Syrian parents in northern Lebanon, he returned to Syria with his family as a teenager. However, in 2011, conflict forced him to flee back to Lebanon. Carpi raises an important question: what is Wael lacking in order to live as a local resident considering his long-standing connection to Lebanon? The choice to start the book with this example prompts readers to question assumptions about both aid recipients and providers, as well as hosts and refugees.

While Carpi draws on her own personal experiences working with displaced persons in the country, the majority of the book is built upon diachronic ethnographic research conducted in Lebanon, particularly in the Dahiye and Akkar regions, focusing on the period from the July 2006 war to the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011. Carpi employs the apt musical term 'polyphony' to describe the diversity of voices integrated in this rich account of the transformation of Lebanon into a humanitarian space. The ethnographic work is truly impressive and demonstrates the author's deep understanding of the region, its history, and its realities. The book captures experiences of assistance providers, including international organizations and Hezbollah, as well as

various refugee populations in Lebanon, such as Palestinians, Sudanese, Iraqis, and Syrians. Additionally, it sheds light on the circumstances of local residents, who sometimes find themselves in situations comparable to, or even worse than, refugees. One powerful and tragic example highlighted by Carpi describes what she terms as 'the most violent and bitterly ironic face of identity politics' (Carpi 2023: 126). In 2013, vulnerable hosts from Akkar pretended to be refugees, acquiring fake Syrian passports in an attempt to secure passage to the Australian coast. Tragically, they drowned en route. This desperate act was aimed at ensuring the economic survival of these Lebanese people struggling to support themselves in Lebanon, justifying their migration through the support of the international assistance regime.

The arguments presented in the book are well-supported by a combination of ethnographic research, personal experiences, and historical analysis. The author offers a comprehensive examination of the complexities of humanitarianism and its impacts on both Lebanese society and refugee populations. The exposition is clear and structured. Even readers unfamiliar with the region would be able to follow the author's arguments and perspective effectively, particularly aided by the initial two chapters: 'The Politics of Displacement in Lebanon' and 'Lebanon's Assistance Landscape'.

The book addresses the central question by offering details on five interconnected themes: the politicization of aid; ethnicization of needs and services in the humanitarian experience; localization of humanitarian assistance; humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality; and finally, neo-colonial aspects of humanitarian aid and hegemonic culture of aid provision. I will delve into two overarching themes drawing on this, and where, in my opinion, the book makes the greatest contribution to the scholarship: first, the concept of humanitarian neutrality and, second, the critical examination of the humanitarian sector and its accountability.

Carpi explores the dynamics of humanitarian aid provision in Lebanon highlighting the diverse approaches to neutrality adopted by different aid organizations (Carpi 2023: 100–107). Carpi's book contributes to ongoing theoretical debates regarding humanitarian principles, with neutrality being the most contentious (Sharpe 2023: 6). While certain NGOs openly reject neutrality, it is embraced by organizations like the United Nations and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (Slim 2022: 4, 16). However, the interpretations of neutrality, even among humanitarian actors who formally endorse this principle in their policies and documents, including for diplomacy purposes, often diverge significantly when it comes to a mode of operating neutrality in practice. Carpi notably elucidates the intricacies of how neutrality is implemented on the ground in Lebanon, a definite strength of the book. She discusses how Gulf-funded NGOs, influenced by Islamic values, embraced a form of 'political realism' that diverged from Western humanitarianism's notion of neutrality. Some of these NGOs perceived political solidarity with beneficiaries as essential for effective action on the ground. The analysis contrasts these approaches with those of secular NGOs like the UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Danish Refugee Council. While Western NGOs often view neutrality as a means to access beneficiaries and build trust with local authorities, there was a common belief that they used neutrality to mask political agendas. Carpi also highlights the failure of neutrality as a diplomatic instrument aimed at expediting peace through the provision of aid during Lebanon's crises and its role in exacerbating mistrust among beneficiaries. The insistence on neutrality and the moral expectations of aid providers made many refugees feel the need to depoliticize themselves in order to adapt to their host environment and receive aid. In turn, many refugees expressed frustration of being passive recipients and resisted being framed as victims and emphasized their political dimension. Carpi's analysis of neutrality resonates with similar reflections by other authors within various humanitarian contexts. The discussion surrounding the potential abandonment of neutrality has emerged notably in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine, where most humanitarian workers express greater sympathy for the Ukrainian cause compared to the Russian one (McLachlan forthcoming).


Secondly, a core focus of Carpi's book lies with the humanitarian actors and their accountability. While academic literature has traditionally concentrated on refugee populations and

state actors involved in migration management, Carpi's work significantly contributes to the expanding body of literature on understanding the growing power and role of humanitarian agencies and workers within the refugee regime, often operating autonomously from governments (see e.g. [Bradley et al. 2023](#)). For example, she delves into the ways in which humanitarian projects contribute to the construction of racial and national identities. Carpi argues that humanitarian practices can create and manage 'ethnic communities' in order to maintain social and political order, and how this can exacerbate societal division and tension. Exploring material discrimination, humanitarian tourism, and epistemic failure within the humanitarian economy, Carpi employs the concept of 'Southism' to outline the hierarchical and paternalistic attitudes of international humanitarian actors towards the Global South. In this context, Carpi's research makes an important contribution to the burgeoning research on the decolonization of humanitarian aid (see e.g. [Aloudat and Khan 2022](#); [Naraynaswamy 2024](#)).

Carpi concludes by critiquing the overreliance on emergency-driven aid and the insufficient focus on long-term development. She observes that 'the crisis-making machine thrives on emergency, rather than on emergency per se, insofar as ordinary affairs are believed to worsen if aid is withdrawn' ([Carpi 2023](#): 161). The encounter with Wael in the book's opening chapters foreshadowed the insight that the discourse surrounding emergency crises can alter or shape social connections, potentially fostering distance from or proximity to other individuals and groups, as well as influencing the broader political organization of society. The book ends by stressing the limitations of a purely relief-oriented approach and the imperative of addressing the root causes of suffering. Carpi argues that Lebanon's history demonstrates that humanitarianism cannot leave a better welfare system in place, offering a valuable lesson for crises zones elsewhere.

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