Syrian Diasporans as Transnational Civil Society Actors

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SYRIAN DIASPORANS AS TRANSNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A NETWORK FOR REFUGEE ASSISTANCE

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Abstract

This article presents early qualitative data from an ongoing project that includes interviews with members of a Syrian diaspora network engaged in giving and receiving philanthropy. With the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis, the network began to provide education for displaced Syrian children in Lebanon in addition to its other activities. The purpose of the research project is to understand motivations and mechanisms of humanitarian assistance toward a conflict region, and also if and how the practice of philanthropy is tied to peacebuilding on the ground and individuals' sense of political efficacy. This article gives particular attention to the civil society aspects of diasporan assistance, and how those engaged in humanitarian aid conceive of their influence on politics, policy, and peacebuilding.

Keywords

refugees, diaspora, philanthropy, civil society, humanitarian assistance

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The Syrian conflict has produced the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II, with estimates that over 4 million people have fled Syria, and 7.6 million more have been internally displaced (UNHCR, 2015). The world has been shocked by images of the conflict's human toll, particularly on the migrants the conflict has generated. Great attention has been given to disturbing images of families crowded upon small boats traversing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, with photos of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian boy whose body washed ashore on a Turkish beach after a boat carrying his family to Greece capsized in September 2015, arguably generating the most horror (Parkinson and George-Cosh, 2015). This horror stems not only from the uncivil conflict that drives these migrants out of Syria. We also are horrified by our own incivility as a world community that finds itself unable, or worse unwilling, to resolve the conflict in a way that is meaningful to the millions of individual lives that have been torn apart by the Syrian war.

While the conditions of Syrian migrants headed from the Middle East to Europe rightfully generate outrage, so should the everyday incivilities and injustices faced by Syrian migrants remaining in the Middle East. The lives of these migrants have received relatively less attention on the world stage. Nearly 1.5 million displaced Syrians currently reside in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2015), a country that is a focus of this article. Lebanon is one of the smaller host countries in the region, with an estimated population of only 4.6 million in 2012 (United Nations, 2015) , and geographically small. As Ninette Kelley, UNHCR Representative to Lebanon, notes, "No country in recent memory has taken on more refugees proportional to its size," (UNHCR 2014, p. 3). Refugees live in more than 1,700 communities in Lebanon, with many smaller communities serving as home to more Syrian refugees than resident Lebanese. More than 1,400 informal refugee settlements also have sprung up around the country (UNHCR 2015).

Uncivil hosts? Syrians in Lebanon

The small country of Lebanon must be commended for receiving more than 1.5 million displaced Syrians (UNHCR, 2015), and the many instances of goodwill from the Lebanese people toward Syrian migrants should not be overlooked. However, we must not pretend these migrants have been welcomed with entirely open arms. In many ways migrants have left one uncivil context for another. In a country where infrastructure was already weak prior to the Syrian conflict, the influx of a large and extraordinarily vulnerable population has created a tremendous strain (UNHCR 2014). As time passes and pressure on resources continues, the Lebanese increasingly blame Syrian refugees for the country's economic, criminal and social ills (Wehbeh 2016). The Lebanese, with their long experience of sectarian civil war, also blame Syrian migrants for their role in disturbing the demographic balance between Christians and Muslims (Hawi 2015). Pervasive anti-Syrian sentiment stemming from the Lebanese experience under Syrian occupation from 1976 - 2005 only exacerbates the situation, and increases Lebanese discriminatory behavior against Syrian refugees (Kanaan 2014, Shoufi 2014). Syrian migrants find themselves in a context where they are legally prohibited from building dwellings with materials more substantial than cardboard and plastic even at the height of winter, where Syrian children are regularly subjected to brutal child labor practices, and where the aid they receive is tightly controlled by camp "bosses" or shawish (sherriffs). After many years of enduring unemployment, and tasked with supporting their mothers and siblings, many young teenage boys return to Syria to fight in the conflict their family left to escape, simply because armed groups are the only paying employers around .

A study of Syrian diasporic aid in Lebanon

Within this context of antipathy and incivility, examining the potential contributions of diaspora communities to development and peacebuilding becomes essential. In a country like Lebanon, where there is decreasing capacity and willingness to serve refugees, the ability of Syrians in the diaspora to provide resources and services can have a powerful impact on the civility of Syrian migrants' day-to-day lives. Much existing research focuses on the potential that diaspora remittances (i.e. money sent to family members in countries of origin) have for stimulating economic growth in the developing world. Less research (Glick Schiller and Çaglar 2009) has been conducted on the philanthropic practices of diaspora communities targeted toward individuals who are not family members; and when, why, and how diaspora communities support peacebuilding and development efforts in their countries of origin.

This article presents early qualitative data from an ongoing project that includes interviews with members of a Syrian diaspora network engaged in giving and receiving philanthropy. The purpose of the project is to understand motivations and mechanisms of philanthropy toward a conflict region, and also if and how the practice of philanthropy is tied to peacebuilding on the ground and individuals' sense of political efficacy. This article gives particular attention to the civil society aspects of diasporic assistance, and how those engaged in humanitarian aid conceive of their influence on politics, policy, and peacebuilding.

The network members are Syrians or individuals of Syrian descent living in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. The nonprofit organization associated with the network was originally created to promote education and entrepreneurship among young Syrians, and its primary activities were providing scholarships for Syrian youth to attend U.S. universities, and organizing mentoring relationship and start-up competitions for young entrepreneurs. With the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis and the increasingly dire need for education among Syrian refugee youth, the organization hired its first ever paid staff and began to provide education for displaced Syrian children in Lebanon. In spite of Lebanese schools enrolling 90,000 Syrian refugee children in 2013-2014 (UNHCR 2014), an estimated 300,000 Syrian children are out of school, a number that is equal to the entire population of Lebanese children in the public school system (UNHCR 2015). As of March 2016 only 47% of Syrian school-aged children attended public Lebanese schools due to lack of capacity (Antaki 2016). The organization currently operates three schools in Lebanon that enroll approximately 1,500 students, and also provides educational consulting and training to other NGOs in Lebanon.

We chose to focus on this particular network because of certain characteristics that may make it a "model" for other networks. The nonprofit organization associated with the network is very young (founded in 2011), yet has expanded quickly to more than 70,000 members, has had a comparatively high level of success with fundraising, is very well organized and provides highly professional services. As will be noted, this is somewhat unusual in diasporic organizations, which are often characterized by philanthropic amateurism (Brinkerhoff 2011, Salamon 1995). The ultimate goal of the research project is to compare the network to other Syrian diasporic networks in an effort to explore what aspects might be easily duplicated by other diasporic organizations, and which may be tied to the unique characteristics of the network's board members (who are very highly educated and comparatively high income volunteers with strong professional networks.)

The role of diasporas in humanitarian assistance

Modern diasporas may be described as 'ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin—their homelands' (Sheffer, 1986, p. 3). Many authors refer to humanitarian aid provided by diasporans as diaspora philanthropy. For the purposes of this discussion we define diaspora philanthropy as money, goods, volunteer labor, knowledge and skills and other assets donated for the social benefit of a community broader than ones' family members. This aid is targeted toward a country or region where there is a population with whom the donors have ancestral ties. The focus on ancestral ties rather than merely geography allows us to consider, for example, Syrians in Canada giving to conflict-displaced Syrians in Lebanon. This allows us to fully acknowledge the transnational dimension of diaspora communities, where borders are ambiguous and contested.

There are many reasons why diasporans may be interested in humanitarian assistance toward those with whom they share ancestral ties. Membership in a diaspora involves an awareness of, and often an emotional connection to, a shared homeland, language, and culture. This emotional connection often fosters an interest and concern for the plight of other diaspora members in the homeland or elsewhere (Best et al. 2013, Brinkerhoff 2008, Brinkerhoff 2011). Werbner (2002) explains that diasporas are deterritorialized communities that view themselves as sharing a collective destiny despite their geographic distribution. Werbner, in a sense, argues that diaspora assistance is essential to being a diasporan, stating that proving generosity beyond one's present country of residence and contributing material and cultural goods across national borders is a critical means by which diaspora members prove their connection to their homeland (Werbner 2002). The idea that transmission of money and other goods serves as a form of identity expression and belonging is supported by other scholars (Brinkerhoff 2011, Nielsen & Riddle 2009). Brinkerhoff (2008, 2011) notes that in addition, diasporans may be motivated to give by a sense of responsibility, due to their comparative wealth or quality of life in their country of residence. Cameroonian scholars Tchouassi and Sikod (2010) argue that diaspora philanthropy may be more a function of cultural norms, and that in many cultures such as their own, social needs are provided mostly by the family, clan, or ethnic group. In their analysis, diaspora philanthropy exists because diasporans continue to live by these norms and pass them to their children (Tchouassi and Sikod, 2010). Brinkerhoff (2011) agrees that cultural obligations may be a factor influencing diaspora interest in development in their homeland.

In international development policy, much is made of diaspora groups' potential to contribute to development and peacebuilding in their countries of origin (Rahman 2011). However, little empirical research exists on the topic. Much of the literature on the development impact of diasporas on their countries of origin focuses on remittances, business investing, and business networks (Brinkerhoff 2009, Chacko & Gebre 2013, Lowell and De la Garza 2000, Gillespie et al. 1999, Gillespie et al 2001, Leblang 2010, Mehrez & Hamdy 2010, Mohan 2002, Mullings 2011, Mutume 2005, Newland & Tanaka 2010, Nielsen & Riddle 2010, Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002, Özden & Schiff, 2005, Page & Plaza 2006, Sikod & Tchouassi 2007, Newland & Patrick 2004, Riddle et al. 2008, Tchouassi & Sikod 2010). Literature focusing on philanthropic activities by diaspora communities is much more limited, so much so that Brinkerhoff (2014) describes this area of research as being in its infancy. The body of work in this area is growing (see for example Brinkerhoff 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Dhesi 2010; Hilber 2008; Johnson 2007; Merz 2005; Moon & Choi 2012; Newland & Patrick 2004; Newland et al. 2010; Sidel 2008; Tchouassi and Sikod 2010), but as is often noted, much of the research is limited to case studies of a single

country, organization, or ethnic community (Brinkerhoff 2014, Sidel 2008). As such, Johnson (2007) describes diaspora philanthropy as one of the least understood subfields of philanthropic practice. Scholars do seem to agree that, with some exceptions, diaspora assistance is largely an ad hoc practice that has not evolved into a more strategic practice of philanthropy (Newland & Patrick 2004, Sidel 2008).

Scholars understand diaspora assistance to be a crucial, though difficult to disaggregate, component of remittances, which are beginning to be studied in more detail (see for example Orozco 2001, Özden & Schiff 2005, Page & Plaza 2006, Sikod & Tchouassi 2007, Tchouassi & Sikod 2010). Aside from remittances, hometown associations are the most studied mechanism of diaspora philanthropy, particularly toward Mexico (Newland & Patrick 2004). Individuals from the same community in Mexico often migrate to the same town in the United States, and in their U.S.-based communities individuals organize to collect small donations to fund projects of interest in their home village or town (Merz 2005, Orozco 2001, Orozco 2003, Orozco 2004, Rabadán et al. 2011). Hometown associations in Mexico often send money home for health, education, and sports projects, sometimes working up to physical infrastructure, job creation, and other activities, sometimes in partnership with the Mexican government (Orozco 2001, 2003, 2004). Similar associations have been found to operate in Bangladesh (Brinkerhoff 2008), the Philippines (Sidel 2008), and countries in Central Africa (Tchouassi & Sikod 2010).

Much of the excitement around diaspora philanthropy in the policy world has to do with the comparative advantages diasporans are thought to bring in contributing to development in their homelands. Diaspora members have an emotional and social commitment to the homeland and their fellow diasporans that may lead them to direct assistance toward locations that are not of as much interest to large scale development donors such as the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the United Nations among others (Brinkerhoff 2014). Emigrants also are thought to have a better understanding of specific needs and how to best address them when compared to other philanthropists or development professionals (Johnson 2007, Newland & Patrick 2004). Finally, diasporans may be particularly adept at identifying dependable partners and may be seen as more credible by local partners; they also have means to enforce agreements even in places where the legal system is fragile (Brinkerhoff 2011, Newland & Patrick 2004).

Diaspora assistance seems to offer numerous benefits, but many challenges exist. Countries of origin may view diasporans as politically threatening, especially if they left the country not for solely economic reasons but because of political conflict (Brinkerhoff 2011, Shain 2002, Shain & Barth 2003). Because the practice of assistance is often so dependent upon friend and family networks, there is no guarantee that funds will reach those in greatest need, and social equity concerns can arise (Bains 2014, Brinkerhoff 2008, Van Hear et al. 2010). While there is reason to believe that emigrants may have a better sense of local needs than some other donors, the priorities of diaspora donors may not align with the needs or priorities of beneficiaries, and the largely amateur and volunteer nature of diasporans can decrease effectiveness (Newland et al. 2010, Salamon 1995). For example, during a meeting where diasporan donors to this particular network were emphasizing the potential use of iPads to allow refugees students to access internet-based educational platforms, organization staff had to remind the emigrants that internet was not readily available in the tent camps, and that very few relevant internet applications were available in Arabic.

Finally, it is important to be mindful of the fact that, for all the hope we may have that diasporan assistance can increase civility in these uncivil times, they can at times also contribute to incivility. In some cases, diasporans from conflict zones actively contribute to violent conflict

in their countries of origin by providing support to warring factions (Newland & Patrick 2004, Orjuela 2008, Østergaard-Nielsen 2006, Shain 2002, Van Hear et al. 2010, Wayland 2004). Newland and Patrick (2004) suggest that diasporans may be even less willing to compromise than individuals remaining in the country of origin because they are shielded from the daily effects of violence. Emigrants provide support to warring parties in terms of weapons, personnel, skills, and money and contribute to conflicts in nearly all world regions (Newland & Patrick 2004, Van Hear et al. 2010). In summary, while there are many purported benefits and advantages in diaspora philanthropy, there are drawback and challenges as well that must be carefully considered. Davies (2010) cautions that the behaviors of diasporans are very context specific, and as such can be only one component of efforts to address suffering or alleviate conflict.

Methodology

This article presents early data from an ongoing project, with data continuing to be collected at present. This was gathered using semi-structured interviews with members of a particular Syrian diaspora network . Because of the study's intention of examining assistance within a specific network, the interview participants have been purposefully selected based on their ties to this philanthropic network and the sample has been supplemented by snowballing. These diasporan Syrians are engaged in activism, volunteering, donating, and other philanthropic activity targeted toward Syrians both within Syria, displaced to neighbouring countries (e.g. Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon) and further afield to where Syrians have migrated (such as the United States and the countries of the Arabian Gulf.) Recipients of assistance were also interviewed.

The interview protocol, based in part on a survey by Riddle and Brinkerhoff (2011) and an interview protocol by Soss (2000), contains questions that explore personal motivations for becoming involved in philanthropic activity, mechanisms by which diasporans engage with individuals inside Syria and within the region. It also contains questions about links between philanthropy and individuals' perceptions of the Syrian diaspora's ability to affect politics, policy and peacebuilding efforts inside Syria. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the United States and Lebanon and by phone and Skype/Google Hangouts with individuals in the Arabian Gulf, Europe, Lebanon, and North America. Face-to-face interviews will continue in Germany in summer 2016. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and English.

Many of the emigrant Syrians and their descendants in the sample (13 at present, who I refer to very broadly as 'donors') are involved in efforts by multiple diaspora networks and talked about some of their work with these other initiatives as well. Individuals from two 'recipient' groups are also being interviewed. One group are Syrians students who received scholarships to study at university in the United States. These scholarship recipients (three in the sample at present) are now being socialized by the network to become donors and have begun raising money for future scholarships. Because of the hybrid nature of this role, I refer to this group as "student recipient/donors". The second group is adult Syrian refugees in Lebanon who have been hired by the network's NGO as teachers (eight in the sample at present).

Other participants include the organization's only two paid management staff, who coordinate efforts on the ground in Lebanon and serve as intermediaries between the diasporan Syrians and Syrian refugee teachers and students. The two intermediaries, one of whom is a NGO management professional and the other an education administration professional, receive and manage funds from the diaspora. The intermediaries then use the funds to engage in activities such as handling all NGO management tasks inside Lebanon, hiring and training teachers, identifying and managing sites for schools, and designing appropriate curricula and educational

interventions. See Figure 1 below for details on the geographic dispersion of the current sample, and Table 1 for a review of the details of the current sample.

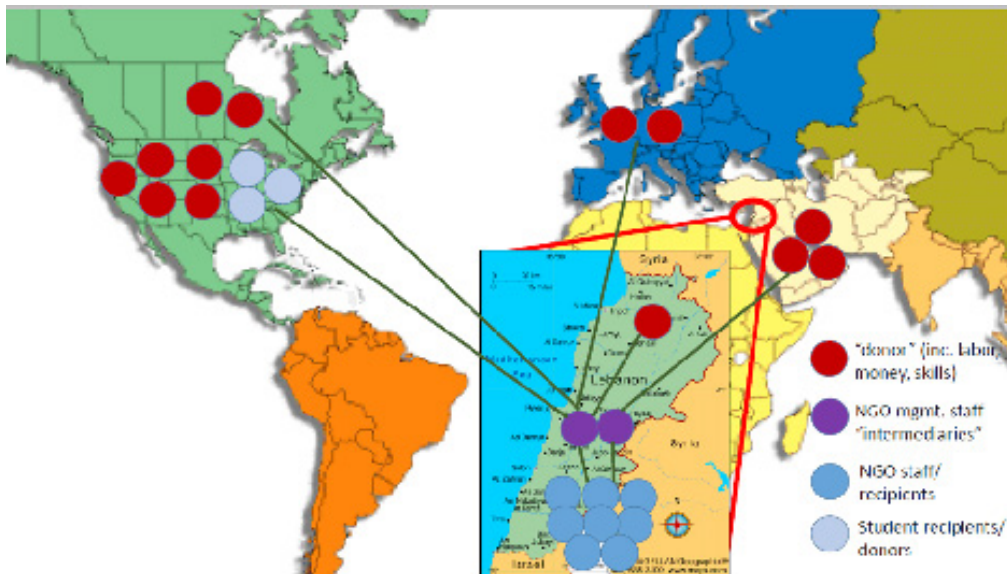*Figure 1: Geographic dispersion of interview participants*

Figure 1

Table 1: Characteristics of Sample

Interview Participant	Number
Donors	13
Student Recipient/Donors	3
NGO Staff/Recipients	8
NGO Management/Intermediaries	2
CURRENT TOTAL	26

Conflict and identity as motivations for diaspora philanthropy

Though data collection and data analysis for this project are at an early stage, the existing data do present some interesting preliminary findings. Individuals interviewed report a number of motivations for their involvement in diaspora assistance, both through this network and other diaspora efforts. In addition to reporting family influences, interviewees report a number of influences that are consistent with research on identity in contexts of conflict, which makes a great deal of sense given the current conflict in Syria. For many individuals, diaspora membership identity and conflict factors intertwine to motivate philanthropic activity.

As the literature would predict (Best et al. 2013, Brinkerhoff 2008, Brinkerhoff 2011, Nielsen & Riddle 2009, Tchouassi & Sikod 2010, Werbner 2002), all diasporan Syrians in the sample mentioned their Syrian identity and their emotional connection to Syria, which create an overall sense of belonging to the Syrian community, as strong motivators for becoming involved in diaspora assistance. This strong emotional connection was true even of the many interview participants who had never lived in Syria. In fact, many individuals who had never lived in Syria mention, "Because I'm from Syria…", "Because I'm from Aleppo…", or "Because I'm from Homs…" as prefaces to explaining their activities, illustrating the imagined origins that are often held in diaspora communities.

For many individuals, the current conflict in Syria also played a strong role in their identity and in motivating their philanthropic practice. The conflict generates an array of emotions, moving diasporan Syrians to feel solidarity with their fellow Syrians and calling them to action. In addition to feelings of compassion and sorrow, participants felt a sense of responsibility and even guilt based on what they perceived as the relatively random luck and good fortune of living outside Syria during these difficult times. This rise in identity salience due to conflict is commonly described in literature on violent conflict (Flanigan 2010, Gurr 2000, Kaufman 2001, Tilly 2003). One individual describes how the Syrian conflict activated her Syrian identity.

> To be honest, before the uprisings/revolution, I always thought of myself as Arab-Canadian most of the time. I didn't feel a belonging to Syria as the country because for me, what Syria represented as an official entity was not what I ascribed to. It was more the people I identified with. I think with the uprising, all of the emotional turmoil that we went through and the Arab Spring and everything, then I think my Syrian identity sort of magically surfaced. So now I speak a lot more about being Syrian than before.

This particular diaspora network was created just before large-scale violence erupted in Syria, and as such was not created with a mission to serve refugees. However, just as many of the individuals describe being motivated to become involved in assistance toward Syrians as a result of the crisis, the organization itself also broadened its mission as a result of the conflict. As one board member explained:

> The sad part or the exciting part is if it weren't for the crisis I'm sure what we would be doing would be on a much smaller scale. Right we would probably just be hoping to be giving twenty or thirty university scholarships a year, and that would be kind of what we are doing. Just because of everything that has been going on (the Syrian conflict), there's so much need for our and other organizations' services that we've just grown and it has become this huge thing. And in a lot of ways if it weren't for what is going on (the Syrian conflict), I'm sure that wouldn't have happened.

Political Efficacy in Syrian State Politics and the Policy Process

It is important to note that the nonprofit organization associated with the diaspora network in this study is explicitly and very intentionally apolitical. However, individuals were asked their personal opinions on the ability of Syrians in the diaspora to affect positive political or policy change inside Syria. With only a single exception, our participants felt that the diaspora have little, if any, ability to impact the political or policy landscape in Syria as civil society actors. This grim view seems to be based on low sense of external political efficacy (beliefs about the responsiveness of government to citizen demands), rather than internal political efficacy (beliefs about one's own competence to understand and participate effectively in politics) (Finkel 1987, Madsen 1987, Shirvastava 1989). The interviewees are largely in consensus that there is little hope of influencing policy within Syria under the current regime and with the chaos that prevails in non-regime areas. As one individual noted:

> Knowing how decisions and things are made in Syria I don't think it's easy to affect that. Because everything is political and everything relates back to the leader who says what happens and what doesn't happen. Therefore, the social movements, even though I really appreciate them and I was a part of many when I was in Syria, and I would support them all the way to the end, I don't really think they can make a change. Unfortunately.

Another individual said to us:

> We can only hope on the long term. You know, I don't think the government pays much attention to non-governmental organizations or nonprofits or any other private institutions as good examples that they can follow or things that they can improve. It's very farfetched to influence the government. It's kind of lost hope, it's just extremely difficult but maybe in very long term, in the far, far future.

There is also a sense that other than a general desire for safety and stability, there is little agreement among Syrians in the diaspora about what they would want to see happen politically in the country. In one participant's view:

> I think one thing that we all share is that on a personal level, everyone wants to help their families. So I think everyone would like refugee laws and refugees to be given spaces and asylum in other countries, not only Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. A lot of us wish to have our families in (our countries of residence). I think that is shared with everyone; they would like to see their families safe. But politically, I don't think we see how we could arrive anywhere by the same route.

The individuals interviewed clearly felt that all Syrians find these to be dire and uncivil times, and that the conflict is undesirable for all. However, because loyalties are so divided, they do not believe Syrians have a shared means of achieving change, or even a shared image of what positive political change would look like, except that it would involve an enduring peace. Among the Syrian emigrants and their descendants, there is a clear sense that if political change happens, it must come from within Syria.

Diaspora contributions to peacebuilding

Our participants do however have a slightly less pessimistic view of their ability to contribute to peacebuilding at the grassroots level in Syria. While there is some sense that contributing to economic development and preserving educational institutions can contribute to peace and stability, more often interview participants see their contributions as occurring indirectly through the education and socialization that happens to immigrants and refugees when they are outside Syria. As one participant noted:

> I would say yes, in that we would be able to educate the next leaders of the country. Giving people opportunities to study abroad, we would be creating a more open minded and more thoughtful, quite frankly, group of leaders. I think through that fairly indirect mechanism I would say yes but that's obviously not a flip the switch kind of thing.

Another individual gives an example from a career development workshop which she runs for refugees:

> After the workshop I ask candidates what do you think? And I get a lot of responses saying that some of them never thought they would be sitting next to someone with completely different political view or from another sect or background, and that they become friends at the end of the workshop. When they discover that they are all having the same troubles, they all left their countries, they all have limited resources, they all have the same troubles, their families, money and future, when they realize that, things back home and their different views don't matter anymore. So in that perspective, something as simple as putting them together in a career workshop, they can see they aren't all that different. So that's an example of how our programs actually bring people together and they start seeing beyond their differences. So hopefully whether it's through (this organization) or personally I can somehow educate Syrians on living better lives and building more peaceful communities.

These responses resonate with the literature on diaspora philanthropy, some of which discusses 'social remittances' (Levitt 1998) that move between diasporans and the homeland, such as ideas, behaviors, and social capital. Brinkerhoff (2011) indicates that among diasporans new, hybrid identities form that integrate features of the country of residence and the country of origin and that diasporans may embrace more liberal values. Diasporans then may be more willing to engage in contentious issues like gender equality, human rights or the use of violence in conflict resolution (Al-Ali et al. 1999, Brinkerhoff 2009, Brinkerhoff 2011, Johnson 2007).

However, as was discussed earlier, the benefits diasporans may offer should not be oversold. Diaspora philanthropy often relies heavily on integration with friend and family networks, and because the poorest of the poor often have fewer links to the diaspora, there is no guarantee that funds will reach those in greatest need (Bains 2014, Brinkerhoff 2008). Donor efforts often are characterized by philanthropic particularism, a desire to help a specific (typically the donor's own) ethnic, religious or geographic group, which can lead to gaps in services and resources in some communities, and duplication in other communities (Salamon 1995). This behavior becomes manifest in diaspora philanthropy as well, with diasporans often showing interest solely or primarily in their own group or region, thereby exacerbating socio-economic inequality (Van Hear et al. 2010). In addition, for all the hope that diaspora members may introduce more

progressive ideas about human rights and other ideologies to their countries of origin, there is some evidence that diasporans connect with groups (such as women's rights groups) in ways that underpin rather than alter traditional inequalities (Lampert 2012). Finally, as was mentioned earlier, there is ample evidence that in some cases diasporans from conflict zones actively contribute to violent conflict in their countries of origin (Newland & Patrick 2004, Orjuela 2008, Østergaard-Nielsen 2006, Shain 2002, Van Hear et al. 2010, Wayland 2004).

Conclusion

Syria is afflicted by a civil war where the ruling regime bombs civilians indiscriminately, and where extremists like Daiish (ISIS) execute people for the slightest religious infringement (Sara 2015). Facing these odds, millions of Syrians have opted to migrate to Lebanon and other countries in the region, or take the risk of sailing to Europe. Hoping to escape death and looking for a new peaceful reality, 1.5 million Syrians have settled in Lebanon, a close neighbor with a complex relationship to the Syrian state. Hopes for a new, more peaceful life slip away as Syrian migrants find themselves trapped between returning to their home country and remaining in an increasingly unwelcoming host country. Syrians with means live in apartments throughout Lebanon until their savings runs out. Those who arrive with little money, and those who have exhausted their life's savings on exorbitantly high rents driven by the refugee rental market, are forced to live in tents and temporary structures even in the harsh cold and snow, because Syrians are prohibited from building permanent structures by Lebanese law (Majed 2016). They face restrictions in access to education and employment, and in many small communities are subjected to illegal but widely practiced curfews that limit freedom of movement. These living conditions, combined with daily discrimination based on accent and appearance, has taken a negative toll on refugees. In this dark picture of uncivil times, there are several areas of hope such as limited international assistance, Lebanese activists fighting against racism with and on behalf of the Syrian refugee population, and diaspora philanthropy.

This article presents early preliminary data from our interviews. The data provides some evidence of the role of conflict and identity in motivating philanthropy in this community but also points to limitations diasporans face in terms of affecting civil society within Syria. The network members report that they are able to contribute to maintaining and promoting availability of education and economic opportunity, which may indirectly support stability in the country. Of course, it is important to note that this small sample presents a limited view of Syrian diaspora members as civil society actors. As the sample grows, greater insight will be possible as interviews data with staff members and refugee teachers will provide aditional perspectives on the experience of diaspora aid and perceptions "on the ground" of their efforts. It is our hope that further research in this arena can provide strategies for effective humanitarian aid, peacebuilding efforts, and civil society development in conflict regions everywhere.

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