

Mobilisation: a mode of survival for overlooked minority refugees

Dina Baslan

Minority refugees and their supporters in Jordan have tried to address the unmet needs of their marginalised communities through daily acts of resistance and informal network-building efforts.

The struggle of Jordan's minority refugees has been overlooked for more than a decade. Jordan's national refugee plan,¹ designed to respond to the Syrian crisis and its impact on Jordanians, has minoritised a community of up to 80,000 people. In learning to survive at the margins of society, many turn to their community for solutions to shared daily struggles.

Between 2015 and 2022, I worked with others to help the minority refugee community in Amman to bolster their voices through volunteerism, activism, research and advocacy work. Through the coordination of Sawiyan for Community Development (*sawiyan* is an Arabic word meaning 'together'), a grassroots organisation I co-founded in 2018, I became part of a community of givers to whom I am indebted for a journey in collective learning and action.

Minority refugees in Jordan

When large numbers of Syrians crossed Jordan's northern borders in 2011-12 following the outbreak of the conflict, international aid flooded in to scale up UNHCR's response in the country. The highly publicised humanitarian operation attracted the attention of individuals searching for pathways to access international protection, from countries such as Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. More than ten years later, with unemployment rising and humanitarian funds dwindling, the Jordanian government has been reluctant to implement policies that might usher in an increase in the country's urban refugee population.

Even if registered by UNHCR, foreigners from countries other than Syria who remain in Jordan beyond their visa's expiration are not issued governmental IDs to regularise their stay. Sponsorship by a Jordanian national or a residency permit connected to a work contract

would regularise their status but is rarely attainable. Nonetheless, the security apparatus has tended to turn a blind eye to the irregular presence of tens of thousands, if they remain 'law-abiding'.

From protests to grassroots volunteer mobilisations

The government's capacity for tolerance was put to the test in November 2015 when hundreds of Sudanese refugees staged an open-ended protest, erecting tents in front of UNHCR's premises in Amman. The protesters held up placards and flags of major resettlement countries such as the US, Canada and Germany, trying to make themselves visible to the international community. They protested against the inadequate assistance and lack of protection and resettlement opportunities available to them compared with those offered to Syrian asylum seekers, and condemned the discrimination and racism they faced. The timing of the protest coincided with home eviction notices issued to some by their landlords for failing to pay rent. Securing shelter is a major struggle for refugees, pushing many to resort to negative coping strategies.²

What the protesters and their supporters did not sufficiently take into account was how risky mobilising can be in a country where civic space is severely constrained, despite warnings from UNHCR. Nor did it help that when the clash between the protesters and the police took place, just a few weeks prior to the Christmas holidays, many diplomats were out of the country. On 16th December the police arrived at 4am, handcuffing protesters and transporting them to the airport where up to 800 were deported to Sudan shortly thereafter.

A marginalised community's effort to mobilise not only had failed but eventually

led to a shared sense of loss and defeat. In the aftermath of the deportations, people who stood in solidarity with the community were prompted to act, moving beyond their existing social circles to create alternative networks. The purpose of such grassroots networks is for people to find a way to mobilise outside of the modernising of economic and cultural systems, such as State or UN systems, instead seeking alternative and more familiar or informal institutions or relations.³

Individual volunteers raised funds, carried out doorstep distributions, organised psychosocial activities in public spaces and, most importantly, forged bonds with those Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees who had been separated from family members by the deportations. In this way, the volunteers – including Jordanians, Sudanese protesters who had avoided deportation, and others – learned first-hand about the everyday experiences and demographics of the Sudanese refugee community in Amman. In return, they started to become known by the community as ‘the volunteer team’.

Building partnerships

The volunteer team built a database to help identify the most urgent needs, which then informed the kinds of partnerships needed. New local and transnational partnerships were forged to address both the exclusion of minority refugees from mainstream humanitarian planning and the emerging needs of the community. For example, a partnership was established with a registered team of American lawyers to seek resettlement opportunities as a means of reunifying families separated by the deportations. Two years later, most separated families were reunited. The volunteers also helped expand another organisation’s food coupon programme to include the Sudanese community by filling out forms during home visits about families’ nutritional intake.

In mid-2018, a team of researchers in our network independently published a rights-focused assessment that exposed the exclusion of Sudanese and Yemeni refugees from national and humanitarian organisations’ programmes.⁴ The report proved instrumental in highlighting the community’s concerns,

conditions and lived experiences. Around the time that the research for this assessment started, my co-founder Aaron Williams and I registered Sawiyan as a local organisation in order to gain a place at the table with international NGOs (INGOs). Our aim was to influence policy and to highlight the perceived discrimination experienced by community members and its impact on their lives.

Meanwhile, our decision to register was contested by some members of the volunteer team who had conflicting opinions about ‘NGO-isation’ and the way it would affect our relationship with the community. It had taken the volunteer team two years to build relations of trust with a community that had grown wary and suspicious of organisations’ failed promises and agendas. While the formalisation was inspired by the volunteer effort, it was independent of it. Sawiyan was a new, different chapter in our journey of mobilisation. The fears of the volunteer members were not entirely unfounded, however. Indeed, shortly after registering, when we had yet to develop our short- or long-term strategy, we found our capacities over-stretched in trying to respond to the (at times conflicting) needs of different parties: the community, partner organisations, researchers, donors and the government. We navigated these murky waters cautiously by trying to communicate transparently about our motives, goals and beliefs. We also had to ensure that new volunteers understood that Sawiyan’s registration as a non-profit corporation forbade us from engaging in informal transfer of funds or goods, or distribution of humanitarian assistance. Any fundraising or distributions efforts to third parties had to be carried out independently from the NGO.⁵

Soon after formalising Sawiyan, we opened an office space where we welcomed visits from potential collaborators and community members. We were not prepared for the acute need that was expressed for such a safe and welcoming space for communities of African origin in Amman. At one point, women migrant workers from Africa approached us for protection and support to escape the exploitation they suffered under the *kafala* system.⁶ We listened and tried to learn about their lived experiences and challenges, including ways



Hassan Abdullahi from Somalia (on right) and Mubarak Adam Ricky from Sudan (on left), co-founders of the English programme, give a class at a local CBO in Amman. (Credit: UNHCR/Lilly Carlisle)

in which they intersected with those of the African refugee community, and made referrals to partner organisations that provided legale and shelter assistance.

My co-founder and I aspired to keep the organisation small, to avoid bureaucracy and to prioritise hiring community leaders. However, work permits are only permissible to Syrian refugees within closed markets that exclude NGO work, making it impossible for us to hire community members officially and pay them fair wages. Instead, we resorted to what many organisations do: paying refugee workers volunteer salaries with no benefits.

Giving back to community through refugee-led initiatives

The opening of the office created a space for people with similar aspirations and dreams to meet. One of the many initiatives that emerged was the English language programme: a project by the community, for the community. Community leaders turned our office space into a classroom in the evenings, and students

of different ages gathered as new volunteers tried teaching – or rather facilitating – in what became an active, collaborative learning process between the teachers and the students from the community. In late 2019, the British Council trained 25 of these volunteer teachers from the Sudanese and Somali community in teaching methods. The programme slowly expanded to other neighbourhoods in Amman through collaboration with a variety of organisations (such as charities, cultural centres, INGOs and grassroots NGOs). Volunteer teachers were for the first time being treated by Jordanian institutions as facilitators of knowledge exchange and production within their own community.

The co-founders of the programme, Mubarak Adam (Ricky) from Sudan and Hassan Abdullahi from Somalia, went on to develop a racially empowering and culturally relevant curriculum for their classes with the guidance of Sawiyan board member, Shireen Keyl. They eventually built a team of volunteer teachers that is keeping the project running

voluntarily, with more than 200 students currently enrolled. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the programme was moved online and offered an opportunity for community bonding at a time of crisis and isolation. When asked why she volunteers her time to teach, one student-turned-teacher cited the lyrics of a song by popular Sudanese singer Hanan Elneil: “to live as a person of worth and value”.

Refusing to give up

Policy change is never guaranteed as a result of mobilisation. Despite the long journey to seek to integrate minority refugees, in response to a government order which came into effect in January 2019, UNHCR stopped registering newly arriving ‘non-Syrian’ refugees. The NGO-isation of Sawiyan represented one mode of mobilisation and, although it was not directly criminalised, legislative frameworks and other factors continued to challenge Sawiyan’s existence, eventually leading us to de-register it and revert to working as a volunteer team. Relationships we built during a time of crisis, however, proved to be irreplaceable and long-lasting; they continue to help those stuck in a situation of limbo to hold on to the dream of a better future and to restore faith in the power of people.

Minority refugees and asylum seekers in Jordan have survived by adopting community solidarity as a way of life. Some have been

waiting for resettlement for more than 15 years. During this time, they have mobilised overtly through protests and covertly through education. Refusing to give up is one form of resistance. As long as refugees resist by choosing to live, we have no other option but to work hand-in-hand with communities, including their leaders and youth, facilitating awareness raising on topics such as self-care and mobilising support safely within the confines of the law. I am hopeful that, through centring the knowledge of community members and building on their skills, we can build stronger partnerships and develop innovative forms of humanitarian action built on deep relations of mutual understanding, trust and respect.

Dina Baslan

dina.baslan@sawiyan.org @dinabaslan

Co-founder, Sawiyan for Community Development

1. Jordan does not have national legislature to govern refugee response and is a non-signatory State to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.
2. Baslan D, Kvittingen A, Perlmann M (2017) *Sheltering in Amman*, Mixed Migration Centre bit.ly/sheltering-amman
3. Asef Bayat (2013) *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford University Press
4. Johnston R, Baslan D and Kvittingen A (2019) *Realizing the rights of refugees and asylum seekers from countries other than Syria*, Norwegian Refugee Council Jordan bit.ly/realizing-rights
5. The Jordanian government has monitored such transactions under strict anti-terrorism laws since the early 2000s.
6. The *kafala* system allows foreign workers to gain residency through sponsorship by a Jordanian national.