

What's faith got to do with it?

Tahir Zaman

The use of the faith-based label demands greater clarification lest it lose coherence and result in adverse policy implications, excluding religiously motivated actors from providing much-needed assistance to displaced communities, particularly inside Syria now.

The emergence of 'liberated areas' in the Syrian conflict has brought into sharp relief the salience of faith in humanitarian activity, as faith-based organisations (FBOs) are explicitly providing the majority of support and assistance to displaced Syrians there. Humanitarian activity provides a platform for the struggle played out between state and non-state actors for the care and control not only of bodies but also of souls. FBOs are concerned not only with meeting biological and physical needs of displaced populations but also with encouraging a re-imagining of how best to engage with the world – providing answers to existential questions confronting people in conflict zones. This leaves the door ajar to charges of proselytisation. How this tension is managed affects how faith-based actors are viewed in the humanitarian field.

Many humanitarian actors object to the use of the faith-based label which conjures up overtones of sectarianism. The Syrian Expatriate Medical Association (SEMA) illustrates the ambiguity of the faith-based label. SEMA concentrates on medical service provision, supplying medicines, equipment and volunteers to hospitals and clinics inside Syria. The doctors at SEMA (all men) are clearly – to judge from their dress and speech – devout Muslims. One of them said: "We can think of Islam as a holistic framework. Within that you have ethical and humanitarian concerns. ... SEMA doesn't carry a religious name ... and concentrates only on medical provision. There isn't any contradiction between the work we do and our Islamic understanding or motivation. You can't separate the two. To be Islamic is to be humanitarian and ethical." For them, to be considered an FBO would mean to explicitly

propagate beliefs and perhaps impose them on others – something the staff at SEMA do not do.

Serving humanity while wearing visibly religious dress creates certain expectations on the part of the displaced people with whom humanitarian actors engage, sometimes marking out their religiously inspired work as qualitatively different from that of other NGOs and agencies. Not all organisations reject the faith-based label. Hayyet al-Sham al-Islami (The Levantine Islamic Association) state that *da'wa* work (the propagation of Islam) is an important aspect of their work in addition to relief and development. This sets them apart from other Islamic initiatives; the director of the organisation referred to it as being "pro-active [...] and not contingent on other services provided". *Da'wa* is understood as helping to build the resilience of displaced people and educating them "against extremism and ignorance [...] to restore a sense of dignity in a way commensurate with the values of the displaced populations".¹

Misunderstanding how religion is mobilised in humanitarian work has led to reluctance on the part of donor agencies and international NGOs to engage with religiously motivated humanitarian actors. The use of the faith-based label demands greater clarification lest it lose coherence and result in adverse policy implications, excluding religiously motivated actors from providing much-needed assistance to displaced communities, particularly inside Syria now.

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1. Author's interview with Dr Maen Kousa, Gaziantep, Turkey. 30th October 2013.

