

Refugee activists' involvement in relief effort in Lebanon

Frances Topham Smallwood

A cadre of educated middle-class Syrian refugees dedicated to improving conditions for Syrians at home and in Lebanon are building a civil society in exile but face obstacles to consolidating their presence and becoming more effective.

There is a significant community of highly educated, middle-class and generally left-leaning Syrian refugees living in Lebanon who are strongly committed to assisting needier refugees and to playing a role in rebuilding Syria, yet whose energies could be harnessed to better effect.

“You can do a lot for Syria from outside,” says one of the refugee activists I met in Beirut. Some were involved in a range of initiatives to support fellow Syrians at home

and in Lebanon, collecting and distributing food and non-food items through networks of private individual benefactors and volunteers, improving conditions in tented settlements or helping Syrian families to pay their rent. Others focused their energies on cultural and educational activities, such as providing art and music classes for refugee children or filming a documentary on the lives of the Syrian intelligentsia in Lebanon. Several were working on projects that they hoped could

sow the seeds of a flourishing democratic civil society in Syria, holding workshops on active citizenship and negotiation.

Most of these initiatives had been established since arrival in Lebanon. For the most part they were small-scale grassroots affairs, operated through networks of friends and acquaintances with little formal organisational structure, though some also benefit from relationships with longer established international or Lebanese NGOs for funding and mentorship.

Though they are doing important work with very limited resources, the capacity of these Syrian-led initiatives to fulfil their potential is hampered by several factors. Firstly, Syrian refugees report that their organisations are not permitted to register officially as NGOs or to open bank accounts, which hampers their ability to secure funding. Some get around this difficulty by partnering with Lebanese NGOs or by registering under the names of helpful Lebanese activists but this entails relinquishing some financial and managerial control to the Lebanese partner along with a percentage of any income.

Barriers to working with more established and professionalised NGOs include perceived discrimination against Syrians and unreasonably high requirements for language skills, qualifications and experience, and play a part in encouraging refugees to set up initiatives on their own.

Political sensitivities also constrain refugees' activities. One activist living and working in Beirut explained that the Lebanese state, with its official policy of disassociation from events in Syria, "has no problem if you work here but don't get involved with back inside Syria." Even those involved in relief work inside Lebanon repeatedly stressed that they make every effort to separate the humanitarian from the political.

Frustration with mainstream response

Though refugees recognised that some good work was being done, criticism of

UNHCR and large INGOs was nearly universal; the perception of wastefulness and corruption may be more important than the extent to which it is accurate, sowing mistrust and souring potentially fruitful future relations between these organisations and local initiatives.

Several refugees involved in relief work complained that Syrians were not being given the opportunities and support they needed to contribute effectively. "If these NGOs don't get Syrians involved in their projects, it's just not going to work. We're the ones who know what's going on, we're working at the school from 8am until 1pm, then afterwards we're sitting with the children for hours at a time. We're Syrians and we understand their situation," said a volunteer with an informal group providing education to refugee children in the Beka'a valley. Another activist volunteer expressed deep frustration with what he saw as a lack of international support for the fledgling Syrian civil society movement. "These small organisations are the first real democratic experience that Syrian youth has had," he says. "But where's the support for it?"

From the perspective of the INGOs and of UNHCR in its planning and inter-agency coordination role, there are doubtless numerous practical challenges to providing the kind of support these refugees would like. And some of these grassroots initiatives in fact are receiving international support, especially those that have been established longest or have more Lebanese involvement. Nonetheless, it does appear that many of these international organisations could do more to make their formal commitment to incorporating refugees' input into their programmes a reality.

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