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Preliminary notes

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Preliminary notes

Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal

- 1 The Syrian war has forced more than three million Syrians to flee and seek refuge in neighboring countries and beyond. Some seven million others have become internally displaced people (IDPs) since 2011. Against this background, charitable giving and humanitarian aid have become more vital than ever for Syrians. It is in this context that the flourishing of hundreds of Syrian associations in Turkey and Lebanon should be interpreted. Previously isolated and rarely in contact with international donors, Syrian associative actors evolve now in a competitive environment in which they need to negotiate their space and resources with local, regional and international humanitarian actors.
- 2 The goal of the paper presented at the conference “Guest and aliens” was to explore how these associations, which are hard to quantify due their unofficial nature, relate to politics. Along with Diane Singerman (1996), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Assef Bayat (2010) – for whom *politics* cannot be restricted to either the control or the explicit contestation of the agencies that exert the monopoly on legitimate physical violence, but rather emerge when and where social actors’ societal projects clash with those promoted by the authorities and/or with the attempts of the latter to gain social control – politics are understood here in a broad sense, i.e. not only in terms of the connections to political parties or movements, of the will to participate in the political debates and to be heard, and of the capacities to influence policies, but also in terms of *raisons d’agir* and production of a politicized discourse. The aim was to show that these associations, which are described by their staff as apolitical, are *de facto* embedded in politics and can contribute, through different ways, to Syrian political dynamics.
- 3 In order to grasp the political sociology of these associations and their relation to politics, it is first necessary to understand where these associations come from and

what they do. Hence, my paper first traced the genealogy of these associations, thus showing the elements of continuity with Syria's pre-revolutionary civil society. In a second part, I analyzed the geographical scope and activities of these structures and networks, and revealed the differences between groups operating in Turkey and those working in Lebanon. Finally, in the third part, my paper moved into their actual relation to politics. I will only briefly reflect here on the first and third parts of this analysis.

- 4 I believe, that "the malleability and adaptability of the associative phenomenon [...] grants it importance as an instrument of societal analysis [...] that reveals a great deal about the tensions of an era" (Laville 1997). In this specific case, the study of Syrian associations has a threefold interest: first, it shows the reconfigurations experienced since 2011 by Syrian civil society; second, it illustrates the interaction between Syrian refugee communities and the local authorities and populations in Turkey and Lebanon; and third, it sheds some light on the new forms of doing, speaking about and relating to politics in the Syrian war context. All in all, it exposes agency in times of constraints.

I. Continuity beyond ruptures

- 5 Prior to the Syrian uprising, less than 1,500 associations were registered in the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Almost half of them were concentrated in Aleppo and Damascus, and more than 60% were declared as charities. Although working under highly restrictive conditions, these social actors were certainly forced into "the politics of as if," (Weeden 1999) but were nevertheless neither always compliant nor pro-regime.
- 6 With the outburst of the popular uprising, Syrian civil society was to undergo significant transformation. Many of the pre-existing organizations were gradually forced to cease activities due to lack of funding, because their members had fled the country, or because the beneficiaries were unable to come to their offices. At the same time, hundreds of networks and structures (more or less) formal would be added to the pre-existing associations in order to coordinate the actions of the protest movement and show the world what was going on inside the country.
- 7 In late 2011, however, as the revolutionary process became militarized, the number of refugees soared, and early activists were either killed, jailed, or forced to flee, humanitarian and charitable organizations took the upper hand over the initiatives mentioned above. Given the fact that any kind of support to the IDPs and to the injured protesters was being prosecuted by the regime, only informal associations and networks found themselves in a position to tackle these issues in future. This is why hundreds of new social structures began to appear across Syria. They operate secretly with few resources, sometimes supported from outside, mainly through exiled Syrians, sometimes not. They are very flexible and in continuous flux.
- 8 In the neighbouring countries, new social structures were also to appear gradually. Some of them were built around new sociabilities born out of exile. Other organizations, however, would also open their headquarters in Turkey or in Lebanon but be mainly based on pre-existing informal local networks emanating from Syria. Ghiras al-Nahda, for instance, was first funded in Damascus by a small group of ten people who knew each other previously. They will secretly support the IDPs until the moment when, in 2013, one of its leaders is caught by the regime. Then the remaining

leaders were forced to leave Syria. They went first to Lebanon; then travelled to Turkey, from where they operate today. Finally, a third category is composed of associations which actually are the branches of older registered associations. For example, Zayd ben Thabit, today in Turkey, is mainly built on the network of the very well-known Hefth al-Ni'me association.

- 9 These examples reveal that the structures which operate today in Turkey and in Lebanon, although sometimes brand new and built from scratch, come in many cases from older networks based on family links, on friendship and on professional or religious relations.

II. Relation to politics: “apolitical illusion”

- 10 When analysing these associations' relation to politics we find a paradox that can be called, following Laurent Bonnefoy's (2008) expression, an “apolitical illusion”. This paradox consists in having actors who claim to be apolitical and show scepticism towards politics while they are *de facto* embedded in politics. Indeed, not only the reasons that push these actors to their commitment can be considered political but also these associations are perceived by most people as *political*, and are connected to political actors, groups and institutions.
- 11 This desire to keep distance from “politics” and to be perceived by other actors as “apolitical” is highly interesting per se. It means above all that being perceived as “political” is considered problematic. Why? Several elements can be highlighted here. Among them, it should be stressed that being “political” equals being perceived as “partial.” Now, partiality can entail problems with foreign donors – who want to have aid distributed in a universal way – but also with beneficiaries, especially when working inside Syria, and even with other Syrian social actors. Equally important is the fear that some Syrian activists feel when speaking about politics. This is particularly true for those associations working in Lebanon, where the political authorities are mistrusted.
- 12 On the other hand, we have a phenomenon that was named by several of my interviewees *tasyis al-igatha* (the politicization of assistance), an expression that clearly illustrates the connexion between the humanitarian and charitable fields and the political realm. It shows too how these associations are seen as highly political by Syrian society. The first outcomes of the exploratory fieldwork I undertook during the Spring of 2014 point in the same direction.
- 13 One of the important remarks that can be made in this regard relates to the people who manage, volunteer and work in these associations: many of them rallied against al-Assad's regime during the first months of the uprising and started to be active, either in the civic sphere or in the relief field, when they were still in the country. Therefore, in a certain way, their current activity is a continuation of their previous militant action inside Syria. Similarly, if we ask them about the reasons for their involvement in these associations, we realize that the religious reasons, which were dominant among social actors before 2011, are now secondary. Engagement is explained in highly political terms. In comparison with Syrian associations in the years 2000, we can observe a clear evolution from local ambitions to the national ones, from the singular to the global. Behind the immediate relief actions, there is a social and a political project. Equally interesting is to explore the existing interaction between these

structures, on the one hand, and the political actors and institutions of the opposition on the other hand.

- 14 To sum up, when analysed in depth, all these elements show how, contrary to what the members and staff of associations hope or claim, these structures are de facto embedded in politics and can contribute, through different means, to Syrian political dynamics. For instance, by supporting those regions under siege, they prolong their capacity to resist the regime, or at least, by trying to keep alive the ideals and values of the uprising.

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