

FINDING THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS: SYRIAN AMERICAN NGOS LEAD THE WAY IN SYRIAN HUMANITARIAN AID EFFORTS

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The absence of an organized effort by the international community to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians outside of government-controlled areas created a humanitarian crisis. As a result, Muslim and Syrian Americans (MSAs) acted as first responders and engaged in individual and collective philanthropic work. The administrative structures of large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations (UN) refused to adjust their bureaucratic mechanisms to robustly respond to geopolitical humanitarian disasters. This lack of resilience during crisis was the impetus for the creation of MSA-led NGOs that are a manifestation of faith in action and served as a lifeline to vulnerable civilians inside Syria and the surrounding region. This study examines the nexus between the surge in the founding of MSA NGOs (2011–2017) and the motivation behind their creation. This research illustrates through participant interviews the intertwined nature of charity and social justice expressed in participants' understanding of Islamic values as manifested in Syrian culture, where faith, charity work, social justice, and advocacy are intricately connected to produce humanitarian outcomes in Syria regardless of geopolitics.

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Introduction

The photo of the Syrian child Alan Kurdi awash on the shore of a Turkish beach galvanized the world to respond to the thousands of refugees seeking asylum in western Europe (Dunhigg, 2017). The vast majority were Syrians fleeing a war and a region impacted with refugees (Connor, 2016). The year 2015 was not the start of the refugee crisis, not even in Europe (Longford, 2013). Frontline countries like Greece and Italy experienced a surge of asylum seekers arriving on the heels of the 2011 Arab Spring (Longford, 2013). However, study participants working in the field of Syrian philanthropy referred to an earlier refugee crisis that began inside Syria in the spring of 2011. The crisis dominating headlines in 2015 began in 2011 with a displaced population inside Syria in areas later known as “opposition held territory” and was caused by the international community’s lack of engagement (Sewell, 2018; Dragovic, 2018; “Aid Crisis,” 2018; Ford & Ward, 2018; Syria Campaign, 2016; Hopkins & Beals, 2016; Ferris & Kirişci, 2015).

By the Spring of 2011 Muslim and Syrian Americans (MSAs) initiated charitable campaigns intended to reach displaced Syrians who were not receiving humanitarian aid via official government or international channels. At first these loosely organized efforts were viewed as filling a gap in humanitarian aid efforts that larger organizations, and the various United Nations (UN) agencies, failed to provide to areas not approved of by the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG), thus exacerbating the situation until it reached its tipping point in 2015 (Sewell, 2018; Dragovic, 2018; “Aid Crisis,” 2018; Ford & Ward, 2018; Syria Campaign, 2016; Hopkins & Beals, 2016; Ferris & Kirişci, 2015).

In 2015, well-established MSA-led organizations replaced the individual lead campaigns that were the hallmark of the early phase of their charity work. This study utilized financial records of five MSA-led organizations to illustrate the expansion of their work (Table 4). Additionally, a comparison of humanitarian aid provided to Syria, Darfur, and Haiti by large international NGOs will highlight discrepancies in giving between natural disasters and geopolitical humanitarian disasters (Tables 2 and 3).

The majority of study participants reported personal religious values as providing significant motivation in pursuing philanthropic work. They identified five factors behind this motivation: 1) the concept of charity as deeply imbedded in Islamic values, 2) charity work was viewed as being more beneficial to the person providing it because of the spiritual reward, 3) charity and social justice are intertwined, 4) permeation of Islamic values in Syrian society and the importance of the domestic milieu in shaping individual interpretations and practices, and 5) it mitigates effects of “burn-out” associated with humanitarian work. Individual charitable work often extended beyond philanthropic involvement and contained elements of advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy to counter the negative media portrayal of Syrians and misallocation of humanitarian aid.

This research explores a nexus of factors through prior fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and a literature review to provide a nuanced understanding of how the personal interpretation of Islamic values shaped the way MSAs engaged world events to successfully deliver aid to Syrian civilians. Participants identified 1) misallocation of humanitarian aid that supported the SARG, 2) donor apathy in the West, 3) association between the Islamic State (IS) and Syrians by the media, and 4) inaction by international governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as factors influencing their philanthropic involvement and growth of MSAs. The final sections of the article are structured to contextualize the participants’ experience and provides a discussion of the multiple factors that influenced participants’ expansion of their philanthropic efforts and the trajectory of the development of MSAs.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with current and former members and volunteers of the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), the Syrian Institute for Progress (SIP), Tampa Women Stars, Medglobal, the Syrian Forum (SF), Zakat Foundation, the Syrian American Council (SAC), and SALAM (Syrian American Ladies Aiding Mothers).

The study utilized a qualitative methodology that included in-depth and open-ended interviews. Twelve Syrian and Muslim Americans were invited to participate in the study. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) self-identified religious affiliation as Muslim, 2) involvement in philanthropic work in Syria, 3) gender, and 4) geographic location. Eight Syrian and Muslim Americans listed below were interviewed, four females and four males: Matthew, Dr. Mohamad, Samer A, Susan, Samer B, Ziad, Dr. Zaher, and Noura. The average age

of participants was between 40 and 50. Participants were located in California, Illinois, and Florida. Interview questions were developed based on field research conducted with Syrian Americans from 2012 to 2015 in the US.

Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Grounded Theory to determine dependent variables associated with the influence on desire to engage in philanthropic work. Interview questions were divided into three sections. The first focused on philanthropic work prior to the Syrian crisis. The second section examined the individual motivations for participation in charity activities. Religious and organization affiliation was explored in the last section.

In addition to open-ended questions, at the end of each question set, participants were asked a Likert-style set of questions to measure: 1) how involved in charity work each participant was prior to the Syrian crisis, 2) between 2011 and 2016, how involved were they with Syrian charity work, and 3) how impactful is their personal understanding of Islamic values on their motivation to do charity work. Each participant was asked to rate their responses on a scale of 0 to 5, 0 being the least impactful, while 5 was the most impactful. The study defined religious affiliation as a personal interpretation of Islamic values. It focused on lived religious values and how they manifested in practices associated with charity as opposed to participation in rituals and ceremonies.

Results

In-depth interviews produced five data sets: 1) philanthropic involvement prior to Syrian conflict, 2) philanthropic involvement post-Syrian conflict, 3) impact of Islamic values as a motivation for philanthropic engagement, 4) self-identified religious affiliation, and 5) organization affiliation (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Philanthropic, Religious, and Organization Affiliations

	Matthew	Dr. Mohamad	Samar A	Susan	Samer B	Ziad	Dr. Zaher	Noura
Phil. involvement pre-conflict	3-4	3	4-5	0	2	1	5	0
Phil. involvement post-conflict	5	2	5	5	5	5	5	5
Impact of Islamic values on phil. work	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
Religious affiliation	convert, humanist non-practicing Muslim	practicing Muslim	practicing Muslim	mid-practicing Muslim	practicing Muslim	non-practicing Muslim	practicing, observant Muslim	practicing, moderate Muslim
Org. affiliation	SAC, SAMS	SAC, SSF, SAMS	SALAM	SIP	Tampa Women Stars	SAC, Karam, Sawasia,	SAMS, SFI, Medglobal, Syrian Faith Initiative	Zakat, SF, Syrian Expatriates

Prior Charity Work Inside and Outside Syria

The first section measured how active participants were in charity work before the crisis. Activity levels varied; six participants reported engaging in philanthropic activities, while two participants reported not participating in philanthropic activity prior to the Syrian crisis. Dr. Zaher, a physician from Chicago, founded several charity organizations and was the only participant who was active with charity work inside Syria prior to 2011. Other participants also were actively engaged in charity work in their local communities.

Relevant themes presented in the second section were five participant-identified variables influencing engagement in Syria-specific charity work: 1) lack of donations by Western patrons, 2) negative media images, 3) humanitarian aid subverted to geopolitics, 4) historic authoritarian rule in Syria, and 5) perceptions that the international community would intervene, ending the conflict quickly.

Participants’ trajectory followed a similar path to involvement with philanthropic work inside Syria post-conflict. The exception was Mathew, the study’s only non-Syrian. Mathew initially became

interested in understanding the Syrian Revolution and the difference between “Muslims and Islamists.” He interacted with Syrian activists via the comment sections of news agencies like *Al Jazeera*. He learned from online activists about underground hospitals and their lack of medical supplies and began purchasing medical supplies from eBay and Amazon to send with SAMS doctors, who hand carried them into Syria. After a year, Mathew decided to go to Syria. He explains,

Basically in 2012 I needed to come in myself. That was a time when we were losing 13 smugglers a month. Basically, every other day someone was being captured, tortured and killed for bringing in medical equipment. I started to feel like a chicken hawk because I wasn't taking any of the risks myself. So, I decided that I was going to go into Syria myself, at least once.

Matthew flew to Turkey and entered the northern province of Idlib and traveled to the border town of Archah. He made three border crossings that trip to deliver medical supplies to field and underground hospitals.

Dr. Mohamad, a Syrian American dentist living in southern California, explains the need for individual initiatives in cross-border aid at the start of the conflict, “No groups existed that delivered aid to the liberated areas. The Syrian Sunrise Foundation came after 2011 because there was no need (prior to the conflict). The United Nations started to give to the government. But mostly ... in the areas of conflict, Homs, *Haleb* [Aleppo], local organizations were distributing money to the affected people.” Dr. Mohamad continues, “What happened before [the war] was locally there were Islamic centers that took care of donations and distributed *zakat* [charity] to the needy, but with the crisis, the pre-existing philanthropic apparatus was overwhelmed.” Additionally, “There were a lot of refugees fleeing to the neighboring counties,” he added.

Noura, a native of Damascus, was swept up by the Arab Spring when it reached Syria, “When the revolution started in 2011, I couldn't focus on any other work.” She soon founded a Facebook group of Syrian Americans who were interested in organizing to help Syrians. The group would later become Syrian Expatriates. Their first event was a fundraiser in Chicago, Illinois, to donate to the Zakat Foundation of America because of the group's access to areas inside Syria: “Zakat foundation was the first organization to jump up, even before SAMS,” Noura recalled. She joined Zakat, first as an executive assistant and later as the Middle East Program Director. After leaving Zakat, she opened the Syria Forum's office in the United States and served as their director until 2016.

Charity work in this initial stage (2011–2013) occurred incrementally and focused on immediate needs. Ziad, a native of Hama elaborates, “We started first by providing warm clothing to keep people warm. We would raise money for the shipping container, and once we raised the money to send it overseas, we would send it. Same thing in 2012 and 2013 and 2014; it kept kind of repeating itself, what we were doing.” Susan adds,

When the refugee crisis happened [2011], there was a shortage of baby formula. It was the end of 2011 or the start of 2012 when I sent my first shipment. We collected one can of baby formula from each family and sent them to Lebanon. When people left [Syria] they could not pack. They left with the shirts on their backs. When they left it was wintertime, now we’re getting into the summer and people need clothes for their kids. So, we started to collect kids’ clothes and we sent them to Turkey. And people started asking every month, what’s the project for this month. And that is really how we started.

MSAs hesitated to commit to large-scale, organized efforts because they expected the conflict to end quickly through international intervention, they lacked experience, and believed large NGOs would eventually provide humanitarian needs. The period between 2012 to 2015 signified a shift in their efforts, coalescing around the founding of new NGOs (SIP, SSF, NuDay, Karam, and SF) and the expansion of existing NGOs (SAMS).

Ziad, who was involved with fundraising in northern California, describes the steep learning curve Syrian Americans experienced, “We did not have any experience in fundraising or anything. Therefore, we were meeting basic needs.” He continues, “I stopped [my work] completely.

[I was] thinking the war was going to be a few weeks, a few months.... not knowing the world would stand silent. Here we are after eight years, still fighting,” said Susan who left her work in fashion to later found the Syrian Institute for Progress (SIP). Dr. Zaher adds,

In general, Syrian Americans expected the crisis would end and Assad to be out of the picture in a few months, similar to what happened to Mubarak and Ghadafi. They [Syrian Americans] wanted to take a shortcut, which was essentially to influence the government here to remove Assad, but they did not want to do the hard work, which was building coalitions, convincing their

natural allies, the Muslim and Arab communities, that this is a just cause and you have to help us.

Samer A is a teacher and member of a weekly women's *halaqa* (religious class similar to Bible study) that meets in private homes. She participated regularly in charity activity as part of her faith, so it seemed natural to start an organization from the *halaqa* she attended. They founded Syrian Mothers (SALAM) in response to expanding humanitarian needs, but did not deliver aid directly, instead they fundraised for established NGOs. Samer A recognized the need for a more organized approach to the charity work,

We realized there was way more need. Medical attention, for example, immediate shelter or relocating people, welcoming refugees. The need went beyond small, local work. It became humanitarian work more than an individual effort here and there. It really needed organized effort to do something. I really felt there was a big lack in the community to kind of unite and group all those channels to put them together. But there was so much need.

Susan echoes this sentiment,

I wanted to do humanitarian work and that is how I formed SIP because I really needed an umbrella. All the early humanitarian aid I sent was all a personal effort. The crisis just got to be work and work and we needed to send containers. So, we started to send containers to Turkey. Then in 2014, the Shriners volunteered to treat Syrian children burn victims for free. All we had to do was take care of the visa issues.

After September 11th, Samer B from Florida focused on working in her community to improve the image of Islam, but after the election of Donald Trump the focus of her work shifted to working with recently arrived Syrian refugees. "I felt that it was at a pivotal point. I felt that I had to focus. I needed to do something," she said. "At this point I was not worried about the image (of Islam) anymore; it wasn't something I would be able to fix anyway. So, let me focus on something I can do."

Her efforts at first were individual, then she connected with other women in her community, and they pooled their resources together to start Tampa Women Stars to "help the refugees integrate into society and help them navigate the system and learn how it works." Samer B explains that the idea behind the organization is to "help people who need

jobs, help them with resumes. If they want to be domestic workers, help them to find homes to work in.” The group’s mission is to “get them integrated into the system where they will need the least help from the state because we knew that was not going to last.”

As MSA-led NGOs grew, the need for greater organization and coordination expanded during the period of 2015 to 2017 and was marked by significant budgetary and staff increases (Table 4). In order to meet new challenges, MSAs created the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS), a coalition of 10 organizations founded in 2015 to provide an umbrella group to increase coordination of aid efforts and engage in humanitarian diplomacy.

Religious Affiliation

Participants reported religious values as a prime motivation for engagement in charity activities. Matthew remarked, “without thinking that God wanted me to do this. Without thinking that I was answering His call, I would never have done this. I never felt closer to God than when I was doing it.” The concept that charity is a foundational Islamic value was a dependent variable. “It is part of our faith to contribute part of our income. And if you don’t do that then you are not a practicing Muslim,” Dr. Mohamad said. Samer B adds, “all the *hadith* [sayings of the prophet Mohamed] talk about helping others. The main focus of the religion is on helping others. It’s even more important than prayer and fasting.”

Last year Dr. Zaher founded the Syrian Faith Initiative, an interfaith group dedicated to advocating for compassion toward Syrians. He expressed the significance of Islamic values in his charity work, “I think it plays a large role in everything I do. I cannot separate what I do related to Syria and my faith and values.” Samer A related a hadith to explain the connection between Islam and charity,

We all know the hadith from the prophet Muhammed “salaah allah ealayh wasalam” (peace and blessings be upon him), if you want to guarantee heaven, you have to do one of three things, have children and raise them to pray for you after you leave this life ... having knowledge that benefits others ... or have ongoing charity, means put your time, money your effort to help humanity. And here Islam does not specify the help to be to Muslims or non-Muslims. It is to humanity.

She continues with an emphasis on the Quran,

If we start to count the verses in the Quran and how important it is to help others it will probably be more than half of the Quran. So, when you give in Islam, it is a way of life. It is a daily practice. It's every minute, every second. It goes in with every breath you breathe. It has to be a living thing. If you understand Islam the way it should be understood, charity is a very, very important aspect of Islam. It's probably half of Islam.

Participants reported that charity work was viewed as being more beneficial to the person providing it because of the spiritual reward in the afterlife. Samer B elaborates,

"For me it's working more towards my survival, to my ahirahi [afterlife]. Yes, I'm helping them but I'm also helping myself. My belief is that if I don't help them someone else will and I need to work on myself." Samer A also turns to the concept of a reward in the afterlife, "I'm one of these people who is running after heaven."

Charity and social justice were viewed as linked concepts by study participants. Islam provides guidance for social justice advocacy and it is an imperative for Muslims. The *hadith* related to preventing evil, as an Islamic value, can be related to issues of social justice and contains three aspects: a) word, b) deed, and c) thought (Nawawi, 2002). These tenets manifest in practice as speaking for oppressed peoples, taking action to alleviate injustice, and finally, mental rejection of oppressive practices. Dr. Zaher explains,

I think for me it was a sense of duty and consciousness and feeling of justice. And as you know in Islam there is a strong sense of justice and if you are an observant Muslim you feel that you are connected to the victims and the disenfranchised anywhere. Not necessarily from your homeland, but from anywhere in the world.

Ziad explains in terms of personal practice, "Absolutely, we were their voice, because they had no voice whatsoever. Even with my little voice, I felt I was doing something. If we were not brought up right to stand up for justice for all, then we won't be doing what we are doing now."

Working in the field of philanthropy is understood by participants as providing personal and societal benefits. However, they also acknowledge the stress and frustration that often accompanies this type of work and report that they look to their faith to mitigate effects of

“burn-out.” Samer A shares her experience, “There are times when I’m tired and frustrated and I want to give up the whole thing. But then I remember there is a God and a heaven and that you work for that, and I remind myself that I’m doing this for God and not people.” Dr. Zaher, who often works in the field of triage medicine, turns to his faith as a balm,

It helped me overcome major tribulations, whether it’s what I witnessed over there (in Syria). You know you feel very cynical, to say the least, and you question whether it’s worth it, doing what you do. But believing in God and that this is the best for you and that you’re doing this for a higher cause will help overcome these issues and negative feelings.

Lastly, interviews highlighted the permeation of Islamic values in Syrian society and the importance of the domestic milieu in shaping individual interpretations and practices.

Susan commented that growing up in Syria, regardless of religious affiliation, charity and generosity were traits that are ubiquitously valued. Ziad also emphasized the importance of the home milieu in establishing values, “How we are today is the root of where we came up from,” Ziad said. Samer A offered this comment, “I came from a place where you put the community first and then yourself.”

Regardless of level of adherence to ritual practices, the effects of lived Islamic values on the philanthropic initiative of study participants was definitive. The extent of the humanitarian crisis in Syria acted as a calling that Mathew explains in a conversation he had with his wife before he left for Syria,

I think that people (Syrians) are praying for God to help them, begging God to save them and He’s calling whoever will answer. Whoever will listen to Him and do this. He’s asking them to do this and you are one of the people who wants to listen to God and obey Him. And it’s Muslims and Christians and some Jewish people in Israel who are doing it. And from other parts of the world and there are atheists who are doing this too. And some of us will listen to Him and some of us will say no, that’s not real, that’s not what I believe. But those of us who were listening to Him, He was telling us all the same thing.

Discussion

Participant interviews assisted in identifying this singular response in addressing both types of humanitarian crises: 1) natural disaster relief and 2) geopolitical humanitarian disasters (GHD). NGO literature clearly identifies two forms of humanitarian disasters, but the UN response remained focused on one approach (Patel & Wild, 2018; Keen, 2013). GHDs challenge the mechanisms of international aid organizations, often escalating the crisis and exacerbating the suffering of vulnerable populations (Patel & Wild, 2018; Keen, 2013). Armed conflict in Ethiopia in the 1980s, and in Darfur in the 2000s, are instances where large NGOs and the UN allowed geopolitics to dictate aid distribution (Keen, 2013). The policy of political neutrality was a failure in curtailing unfolding GHDs, particularly in Syria (Patel & Wild, 2018; Lynch, 2014; Keen, 2013).

Natural Disasters vs. Geopolitical Humanitarian Disasters

Discrepancies in giving between natural disasters and GHD are readily visible (Tables 2 and 3). Global Giving found that people were three times as likely to donate to victims of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal or the 2011 Japanese tsunami than to those fleeing the war in Syria. (Dunhigg, 2017). As Dunhigg (2017) points out, it is statistically unlikely that Westerners will be writing a check to help Syrians.

Table 2: Comparative Distribution of Combined Aid Contributions to Darfur, Haiti and Syria

Humanitarian Disaster	Darfur/South Sudan	Haiti Earthquake January 12, 2010	Syria
Total	\$2 billion 2004–2011*	\$14.9 billion by April (in three months)**	\$66 million 2011 \$1.2 billion 2012*** +\$2.2 billion 2017

Sources: **“Sudan Humanitarian Facts & Figures” (2015); *Poole (2017)*.

** Attkisson (2010).

*** “2014 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP)” (2013).

+ Financial Tracking Service (2017).

In an article titled, “Why Don’t You Donate for Syrian Refugees? Blame Bad Marketing,” Duhigg (2017) indicated a sense of hopelessness is the catalyst behind low donations. “The data was clear. If you can trigger a

sense of hope, donations go up,” said two British scientists who study how charities solicit donations (Duhigg, 2017). UNICEF saw a 636% increase in donations because of the Alan Kurdi photo because it represented a person who could have been saved, and the hope a donation could save someone else increased the motivation to donate, according to Caryl M. Stern, president and chief executive of the United States Fund for UNICEF (Duhigg, 2017; Gladstone & Zraick, 2015). Syria seemed hopeless and complicated to the American public. Dr. Zaher elaborates,

We never had a problem in fundraising from the Syrian community, or even from the Muslim community. But I guess that the general public, the churches and the synagogues who were active in Darfur and Haiti and other places were not active in Syria because I think the administration and the media failed to put the human face on Syria.

Unlike Haiti or Darfur, the Syrian crisis did not inspire concerts or a Hope for Syria Now telethon to provide aid or sympathy to the afflicted. This lack of solidarity and sympathy keenly affected Syrian Americans. Dr. Mohamad said that during times of international crisis “people will open up their wallets and give to the needy, for example, disasters, earthquakes, like the one in Haiti, but for Syria there was nothing.” Mathew shared a similar sentiment and offered the following commentary on why he went to Syria to deliver aid and why Syria failed to be a concern for Americans,

We knew, the Westerners ... knew that until we went in there, and frankly some of us got hurt, our government wasn't going to pay attention. So, we did it to get our government's attention. And to show Syrians there are Westerners, there are Americans who care about you.

Dr. Sahloul offers an explanation,

If he (Obama) or Michelle Obama ... supported Syrian children or if he met with a Syrian refugee or if Michelle Obama hugged a Syrian refugee, you would have seen an outpouring of sympathy, but they never did that and I blame both of them for the lack of sympathy from the American public.

Table 3: Comparative Distribution of Aid Contributions between Agencies to Darfur, Haiti, and Syria

	Darfur/South Sudan	Haiti Earthquake January 12, 2010	Syria
USAID*	\$2.5 billion 2014–2017	\$3.6 billion 2012–2017	\$7.7 billion 2011–2018
OXFAM**	\$3 million (Hudson, 2013)	\$29 million 2010	\$140,000+
WFP***	\$274.74 million 2018–2020 \$18 million 2007	\$55 million Jan. 12–15, 2010* WFP \$422 million in 2010 \$36 million in 2011 \$37 million in 2012#	\$2.8 billion 2011–2015

Sources: *USAID
 **Hudson (2013)
 ***WFP
 #Total as of 2013

Do No Harm, Neutrality, and Impartiality

In the 1990s Mary B. Anderson (1999), in her book *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—Or War*, introduced the, “do no harm” principle, which is one part of seven humanitarian principles that govern NGO behaviors, along with neutrality and impartiality; this trinity of tenets was supposed to ensure that humanitarian aid was not embroiled in the dynamics of conflict or politics (UNICEF, 2003). However, in practice these tenets fail to address the power discrepancy between authoritarian regimes, opposition forces, and civilians (Patel & Wild, 2018; Keen, 2013; Barakat, Deely, & Zyck, 2010).

Ethiopia and Sudan provide early examples of how “do no harm” can act to strengthen the position of authoritarian regimes and tip the scale in their favor over rebel/counterinsurgent groups (Patel & Wild, 2018; Harvey, 2013; Keen, 2013; OECD, 2011). Sudan successfully leveraged humanitarian aid in their favor to depopulate rebel-held areas and Ethiopia employed similar starvation tactics against their opposition (Keen, 2013). Harvey (2013) wrote that the principles of humanitarian action should offer a “framework for principled engagement with governments in situations of conflict (S167)” to mitigate the challenges of humanitarian aid in settings of conflict. In the absence of political engagement, however, the manipulation of state authorities provides the potential to pervert aid intervention to inflict harm (Patel & Wild, 2018).

MSAs engaged in political advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy as a means to counter discrepancies in aid delivery, which

eventually led to gains and small changes in the operations of UN agencies (SAMS, 2016). However, the start of the Syrian Uprising placed the SA community at an impasse as to how to respond. Noura recalls, “SAC and SAMS didn’t want to join. Both organizations were the only Syrian organizations that existed at the time, and they were afraid.” After a year, both organizations became openly critical of the SARG’s handling of humanitarian aid and human rights violations. Dr. Zaher describes how SAMS as an organization evolved to avoid partisanship,

SAMS was initially founded by a personal friend of Bashar al Assad, (who) is also the son of the dean of the medical school. Some people thought, and maybe they are right, (that Assad) asked him to start this organization so it will become a vehicle of advocacy on behalf of the regime in the United States. He (Assad) did the same thing in England, for example. He asked a lot of people to start the Syrian British Medical Society.

As Dr. Zaher recounts, in 2011 “most of the leaders of SAMS were linked to the regime through friendship, business dealings, and marriage. So, when the demonstrations started in March of 2011, the president of SAMS was a friend of Rami Mahloul, who is the cousin of Bashar al Assad.”

At the end of 2011, the majority of SAMS’ board wanted to alert the international community to the targeting of medical infrastructure and personnel by the SARG and provide a medical mission to refugee camps, but the sitting board declined to take action (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2017; Francis, 2016). Dr. Zaher continues,

At the time the board refused to do anything or issue any press releases about what was happening in Syria, even though there were articles and reports coming out that doctors were being tortured or patients were pulled from the hospital and so forth. And of course, civilians were shot during the demonstrations. I was elected to be the president of SAMS in February of 2011, but my term would not start until June of 2011, so in this period I was the incoming president, but I had no power. I told the board, it is our duty that we have Syrian refugees to help by sending a medical mission. Some of the board members agreed, but the previous president and my vice-president did not agree. The previous president threatened to sue SAMS and resign from it and force other members to resign from it if we did that. The previous president claimed it was a political statement, and

these (refugees) are criminals. I said these are not criminals, these are families living in tents. If we don't help them, who will help them?

Despite initial setbacks, SAMS flourished into a large international NGO. The former president followed through with his threat but eventually resigned and SAMS sent out on their first medical mission in September 2011. By the end of Dr. Zaher's tenure as president in 2015, the organization grew to a budget of 25 million dollars with 1,900 people working inside Syria and 150 employees in five different countries.

Misuse of Humanitarian Aid

An investigative article by Hopkins and Beals (2016) based on a study conducted by the Syria Campaign, reported the growing concern that humanitarian aid efforts were being run at the whim of the SARG (Hopkins & Beals, 2016; Syria Campaign, 2016). The article outlined the use and misappropriation of UN funds by the SARG that allowed them to relinquish responsibility of providing health care and food aid to their population, which made state funds available to be directed to the war (Sewell, 2018; Dragovic, 2018; "Aid Crisis," 2018; Ford & Ward, 2018; Syria Campaign, 2016; Hopkins & Beals, 2016; Ferris & Kirişci, 2015).

Loyalists of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, including his wife, Asma al-Assad, and his cousin, Rami Makhlouf, were awarded millions of dollars-worth of contracts by the UN, and the SARG's World Health Organization (WHO)-supported blood bank supplies were diverted to military use (Hopkins & Beals, 2016). Dr. Zaher confirms, "Most of the officers that are working with the UN agencies inside Syria either used to be officers working either in the intelligence, senior intelligence or people selected one by one because they are loyal to Assad." The SARG additionally procures funds through its various holdings throughout the country. The Four Seasons hotel in Damascus is one-third owned by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism, and in 2014–2015 the UN paid out \$9,296,325.59 to the hotel for staff accommodations (Hopkins & Beals 2016).

Critics accuse the UN of complicity in allowing the SARG to utilize humanitarian aid to fill war coffers by withholding aid from opposition-held areas (Hopkins & Beals, 2016). Critics argue that UN partisanship enabled a return of polio, a long-defeated disease, in rebel-held territories, and UN officials are aware of the discrepancies in aid delivery (Lynch, 2014; Sengupta, 2014). One anonymous official commented that the "situation in Syria just doesn't happen anywhere

else” (Leenders & Mansour, 2018; Dragovic, 2018; Syria Campaign, 2016; Lischer, 2006; Hopkins & Beals, 2016; Atmar, 2001). However, the UN’s handling of the Syrian crisis is not new. The UN historically addressed geopolitical humanitarian disasters (GHDs) by allowing the “do no harm” policy to work to the advantage of authoritarian regimes (Patel & Wild, 2018; Keen, 2013).

Syrian Americans are well aware of this tactic. Dr. Mohamad said, “the government was taking all the money and distributing it to themselves.” Susan stated that on various occasions she brought this misuse of aid to the attention of the international community, but the practice continued. Dr. Zaher adds,

Most of the funds that were donated to Syria were channeled through the agencies and programs in Damascus. What that means is that eighty five percent of the funds that were donated went to Damascus, and UN agencies relieved the regime from its responsibility to the people. The regime now did not need to spend money on health care, education and food baskets and shelter. It diverted its resources to buy arms and organize militias.

This misallocation created a vacuum in humanitarian aid that MSAs filled.

Development of Syrian American NGOs

MSA-led NGOs experienced three phases of overlapping development from 2011 to the present. The initial activity was defined by individual initiatives that coalesced into the founding of new NGOs or modification of preexisting groups and finally into an expansion of capability that replaced the use of single person cross-border aid delivery. The budgetary and capacity expansion of NGOs serving Syrians received assistance from large NGOs. Dr. Zaher and Nora cited the early valuable assistance of USAID and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as early as 2011. “Without their help it would have been very difficult to get where we are. And of course, the community supported us with funds. Other organizations like Save the Children, they were working in government-controlled areas, the same thing with Oxfam; they didn’t want to touch us,” Dr. Zaher recounts. Noura adds, “IRC, their Jordan office reached out to me. They were looking for someone who was working in Syria and had access to the neighboring countries. We got three grants from them.”

Dr. Zaher readily acknowledges the shortcomings involved with the rapid expansion of MSA-led NGOs during a time of crisis, but also hopes that their success will be celebrated,

Actually, if anything I would say our experience has been full of successes that we do not recognize because of what is happening in Syria on the ground, but in terms of the mobilization and the building of organizations and the amount of money raised, the Syrian engagement, I think this was a good experience in general, despite the shortcomings we have faced because we are relatively small and also a new community to civil engagement, in general. Most Syrian Americans are not used to building coalitions, to working in the field of advocacy, and all of these things we had to learn in general because of the crisis.

Table 4:1 Expanding Capacity of Five Syrian American NGOs 2013-2017

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Syrian American Medical Society	\$11,084,559.86	\$12,894,886.25	\$20,786,637.44	\$21,144,851.33	Not available
Syrian Sunrise Foundation	Yearly summary unavailable	Yearly summary unavailable	\$10,885,588	Not available	Not available
NuDay Syria	\$216,475	\$4,157,002	\$17,384,821	\$22,218,647	\$40,892,161
Karama	\$656,094	\$844,155	\$1,337,005	\$2,153,907.05	\$3.5 million
Syria Forum*	N/A	\$7,030,076	\$21,895,866	\$24,248,650	\$34,570,686

Source: * Total value of projects for six organizations. Financial records assessable via NGO front webpages.

The Islamic State, Terrorism, and Islam

The appearance of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria dramatically altered public perception in the West of the Syrian Revolution, as Ziad explains,

(The support) it slowly started to take a few steps backwards. The minute of the creation, in 2013, when they created ISIS, that

kind of flipped everything around. And even people in our own Syrian community they started to not support us anymore.

Dr. Zaher continues,

Initially when the demonstrations started in Syria there was sympathy in the media. When the big chemical weapons attack happened in 2013 there was a peak of interest and Syrian sympathy ... Obama did his flip-flop and the American public forgot what was happening in Syria until ISIS started to cut off heads and then the whole thing in Syria became about ISIS.... And when people saw large numbers of Syrian refugees in 2014–2015, marching through Europe, and most of them are Syrian and ... Muslim, I think that generated more fear ... that created a lot anxiety especially with ISIS still in the picture.”

Syrians and Syrian Americans increasingly felt forced into a dichotomy. Dr. Mohamad elaborates, “you (were) being put into two categories, you are either a terrorist or (with) the government,” and the SARG was portrayed as fighting terrorists, “which was not true.” Matthew admits that his initial interest in Syria was, “to understand the difference between Islamists and Muslims.” He continues, “At the time I didn’t know there was a difference between Muslims and Islamists.”

A 2016 Gallup poll revealed that 80% of Americans view Syria negatively (McCarthy, 2016). Perception impacts public sentiment and policy, Matthew discovered,

I remember trying to talk to Americans online and they would say, remember 9/11 when those people were cheering for 9/11? But it wasn’t those people. Little kids that are being targeted who didn’t have anything to do with an attack on our country ... we can’t blame them for things done by people who speak the same language or have the same religion.

Americans opposed US intervention in Syria even if chemical weapons were used against civilians, only 10% supported intervention (Reuters, 2013). The Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs conducted a 2016 study that found seven in ten Americans supported the US military action in Syria against IS, and 57% supported sending Special Ops to fight IS (Smeltz et al 2016). While the study revealed Americans were deeply divided over accepting Syrian refugees (Smeltz et al., 2016). Americans would not intervene to preserve Syrian lives or provide them asylum within the US. “Since 9/11,” Samer B said, “we always had this sense

that people who are Muslim are going to be discriminated against. Because of the destination they are coming from, of course they are going to be discriminated against.”

Conclusion

The philanthropic efforts of MSAs evolved to meet the expanding needs of Syrians and deliver gap aid that was not provided by the SARG or large, international NGOs. The UN’s refusal to alter their bureaucratic mechanisms to address GHDS exacerbated the suffering of Syrian civilians and created a system that allowed the SARG to weaponize humanitarian aid and free-up state funds to bolster war efforts. The UN’s and international community’s continued inability to address GHDS resulted in global repercussions.

Despite the use of chemical weapons and high numbers of civilian fatalities, US public opinion was not swayed to call for intervention into Syria until the emergence of IS. The appearance of IS into the Syrian conflict in 2013 shifted the narrative away from the democratic movements sweeping through the Middle East to a singular focus on Washington’s expansion of the War on Terror. Hobbled between the forces of international inertia and IS, Muslim Syrian Americans turned to their shared faith tradition that emphasizes charity, justice, generosity, and compassion to create NGOs to provide aid to Syrians throughout the region.

Organizations like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and USAID early on provided assistance to MSA organizations, SAMS and Zakat Foundation, and demonstrated that large international organizations can adapt administrative structures to address impending humanitarian disasters caused by geopolitics. Study participants emphasized the importance of their personal values rooted in the teachings of Islam as a prime mechanism of guidance and resilience in the face of adversity and provided a rubric to engage in advocacy and charity work in the face of an unfavorable geopolitical atmosphere. Islam does not stratify charity from social justice, and for the majority of the study participants, the two concepts are intertwined, providing a context where charity work, social justice, faith, and advocacy are intricately connected to produce successful humanitarian outcomes when GHDS occur.

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