

# Cosmopolitanism in Akkar? Why the Role of Host Families Is Significant

Written by Helen Mackreath

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HELEN MACKREATH, MAY 28 2015

“The practice of ordinary people accommodating refugees in their homes is probably the oldest form of giving shelter to those who are displaced and certainly the most widespread”. This responsibility to assist strangers is one of the founding ideals of cosmopolitan thought, first propounded by Stoic philosophers in the fourth century BC. Cosmopolitanism tradition has two strands – the idea that we have obligations that stretch beyond our fellow citizens, and the idea that we take value not only in human life, but also in those things that make life significant – such as culture, practices and beliefs. In Akkar region, Lebanese individuals have been hosting Syrian refugees since the early days of the crisis in Syrian in 2011. In the North East of Lebanon, within Akkar region, it was estimated at the end of 2013 that there were an average of nine refugees living with each host family. At first glance it might seem like the act of opening homes to complete strangers is an example of cosmopolitanism, but this is not necessarily the case here, for many hosts are related (often very distantly), or share similar identifying groupings of religion, culture, language and trade. The entrance of Syrian refugees into Lebanese society in these border regions is nevertheless an interesting phenomena which deserves closer attention; not only because it reveals the dynamics between the stranger (a refugee) and the host, but also because, even if not fully matching the cosmopolitan ideal, a new political community is formed, which has individual hospitality at its heart and implications for the way international refugee humanitarianism is administered.

### Refugee Hosting as a Form of Cosmopolitanism?

At the core of all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, should be citizens in a single community – the direct derivative of the Greek word *kosmopolitês*, meaning ‘citizen of the world’. Today, cosmopolitanism has increasingly been argued as a new concept of how the world should be governed at an international level. Mary Kaldor (2007) has called for a ‘cosmopolitan political project’ as a way of responding to the threat of ‘New Wars’ caused by non-state entities. Archibugi and Held (1995) call for a ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ model of political organization in which citizens have a voice, input and political representation in international affairs, in parallel with and independently of their own governments. These calls for political and institutional cosmopolitanism are rooted in fundamental cosmopolitan relations between individuals, and stand as challenges to conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship.

The arrival of refugees in a host community may provide an opportunity for cosmopolitan ideals to be put into practice. Not only are strangers literally being hosted by strangers, but the paradox at the centre of cosmopolitanism – the contrast between conventional ties of politics and the natural ties of humanity – is being realized. The status of refugee marks the fact that those people are denied membership to the political community of a state. But when refugees are hosted by individuals in host countries, such as Lebanon, they enter different political communities, and are hosted as citizens of the world. As Kant (1983) outlines in one of his three definitive articles for perpetual peace among states, “the right of hospitality occupies that space between human rights and civil rights, between the right of humanity in our person and the rights that accrue to us insofar as we are members of specific republics” (cited in Benhabib, 2004:27).

In Akkar there are many cases of Lebanese individuals opening their homes to Syrian refugee strangers, which I

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researched through field interviews conducted with Lebanese hosts, Syrian refugees, and municipality workers in the summer of 2014. One example during the course of my research was a Lebanese man, who works and lives mainly in Kuwait, and has around 15 'stranger' Syrians living in his property. One family lives in his 'second' home further up the mountains; and one family lives in the basement of his primary home, which he has converted to make livable with a toilet and kitchenette out of his own expenses (Mackreath 2014, research interview). Many Syrian refugees are also being helped by family members. From another interview I conducted, a farmer has his step-brother and his family, and his parents living with him in his home (13 people in total). He does not charge them rent (as he said, "they are my brothers") and employs some of the men to work in the fields, paying them a small amount for this labour (Mackreath 2014, research interview).

The argument which equates refugee hosting in Akkar to cosmopolitanism is however undermined if cosmopolitanism is understood as having a responsibility to strangers (a responsibility to recognise the 'strangeness of strangeness'). While the hosting of literal strangers in Akkar is prevalent, the majority of hosting is still done within identifiable groups (such as blood relation, religion, similar language, food, history). This is not to deny that this hosting would have occurred regardless of these identifiable groups; but in this context kinship networks and multiple criss-crossing ties are what have led the refugees I've interviewed to describe how they have found a "parallel community [to their Syrian home]" (Mackreath 2014, research interview). Other studies conducted in the early years of the Syrian crisis indicated that the sectarian background of the Lebanese hosting area affected the level of receptiveness towards Syrian refugees, and that refugees sought refuge in areas where they perceived that had a better chance of being helped.

The Western ideal of cosmopolitanism which was common to Pauline Christianity and inspired figures of the Enlightenment, is not at play here; the key to understand the context mentioned above is the Arab and Islamic rule of hospitality, which is propagated through art, the Qu'ran as an integral part of Islamic Shari'a, and poetry such as this extract from Abdul-Abbas Tha'lab (cited in Abou-El-Wafa, 2009: 31):

A refugee came to us seeking protection out of fear

and hope and we offered him our protection.

He lived under protection in dignity

All through summer up to the end of winter

Although he lavished his money on us, it remained intact.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres has recognised the humanitarian principles of asylum intrinsic in Islamic societies by saying "Relieving suffering and assisting, sheltering, and granting safety to the needy, even enemies, are an integral part of Islamic Shari'a, which preceded by many centuries current international human rights treaties and norms". Unlike the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, which exclusively define a refugee as someone who flees for fear of persecution, Islam adopts a broader definition of a refugee. According to Islamic migration law (*hijrah*), refugees are not divided into categories of asylum-seekers, stateless persons, internally displaced, returnees and persons at risk of displacement, as in Western law, but are rather all treated equally (as discussed by the UNHCR, 2012).

## Formation of a New Political Community

Whether an act of cosmopolitanism or not, this practice of intermingling between two different groups, which both hold their own political identity (one can be termed a citizen of Lebanon, and the other could be termed, variously, a citizen of Syria, a refugee, an exile, a stranger, or a relation) nevertheless produces a new community with its own set of politics. This is a community defined by individual acts of hospitality, made up of a mixture of members of an existing political community (the Lebanese in this case) and people, (such as Syrian refugees), who do not belong to the political community of a state, but may nevertheless be argued to belong to a 'global community'. It therefore

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opens up the possibility for existing norms to be reworked (categorisations, relationships, power, agency), as a result of the de facto 'temporary' integration of refugees and the role of hosting taken on by the community. This within itself has implications for the state and beyond.

Power and identity are very important in the new community, and these construct new dynamics between different actors. Lefebvre (1947: 40) is useful here for understanding how identity is constructed – he defined everyday life dialectically as the intersection of “illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control”. The refugee both resists the categorisation of the refugee, and actively practices it in order to gain the rights of the refugee. The individual members of the community are the ones taking an active role in assisting refugees, taking on the responsibility of the state and the international community, and the former's dynamic with the latter may be altered as a result of this. This is largely because the state is effectively absent in Lebanon, reflected in the fact that the presidency has been vacant since May 2014, the Cabinet is constrained by political paralysis, and the parliament lacks sufficient consensus to convene to discuss key legislation. The north of the country was also largely excluded from most national and international emergency funds donated to rebuild and rehabilitate the war-stricken areas after the 2006 Israeli War on Lebanon, and this has fed resentment in the region, both amongst local populations and local governance structures, towards the central state.

Syrians and Lebanese are ambivalent about the role of municipalities in conflict resolution and often view them as weak. In general there is a great deal of distrust towards national and local authorities. Resentment towards municipalities has been increased as a result of being bypassed by the international humanitarian community, discrediting them further in the eyes of individuals, who rarely mention them in relation to assistance. The public space within Akkar is devoid of direct Lebanese political interference. This allows the social – the intra-family resentments – free reign to exert itself in the public space. Whilst the Municipal Office claims that one of the two duties left to it is the maintenance of peace and reduction of tensions between the Syrian and Lebanese peoples, this peace is already exercised in part by the individual. One Syrian man explains that it was his landlady and neighbour who saved him when a gang of Lebanese men started swarming and threatening him (Mackreath 2014, research interview); and it is individual antagonisms and injustices which often form the foundation for collective strife. This example highlights that collective or public concerns are being shouldered by individuals, or private actors.

The shifting role of women is also significant here. Women both make up a slightly larger proportion of refugees (51.1 percent of the total Syrian refugee population), and are the most active providers of resources if their male partners are injured (as is common), and also play a substantial role in hosting refugees. The way women navigate these situations, and the status they hold within the new political communities, should have ramifications for the political community formed post-conflict. From my research emerged that a large proportion of Lebanese individuals assisting refugees were older women – either relatives of Syrians who were hosting them in their homes or assisting them paying rent, or strangers who were lending an outbuilding as shelter. The motivations of these women varied between religious motivation (“If God gives you something, give to someone else” (Mackreath 2014, research interview)) to disinterested altruism, and mutual reciprocity. The increased possibility for empowerment they have been afforded as a result of being allowed to occupy, and being recognized as occupying, positions of responsibility as heads of the household should not be downplayed.

The different interactions of the refugee with various actors in the new political community also offer the possibility of altering their identity. Some refugees have succeeded in shaking their refugee identification, such as an elderly couple living in the basement of a Lebanese home who describe how they “don't feel like refugees – the community have made us feel at home. We are very social – sometimes we visit our Lebanese neighbours, sometimes we invite neighbours around to spend time together” (Mackreath 2014, research interview). Others are unable to shake their 'refugee' identity, but not necessarily because of categorisation by Lebanese. One Lebanese woman who married a Syrian man, moved to Syria and has now been forced to return to Lebanon as a result of the Syrian conflict, and she told me how she feels like a refugee despite being welcomed as a member of the community by her family. She describes how “people here treat me like a Lebanese woman and a part of the community, but I still feel like a refugee”, going on to indicate how her dependency on aid and inability to have autonomy over her family's life decisions, make her feel like a refugee (Mackreath 2014, research interview).

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While it can't necessarily be argued that the refugee can ever fully escape the categorisation of 'refugee', it can be said that there is a possibility for their identity to be reinterpreted at different levels of interaction. While refugees still remain stuck in a dynamic of dependency when being privately hosted, this dependency may be slightly allayed by mutual agreements of reciprocity, or more informal 'host-guest' relationships which afford greater dignity. The political community which is formed by the interaction of both refugee and hosts often allows for these identifications to be more fluid and, while this should never be an excuse for a decrease in assistance for vulnerable individuals, it does offer greater potential for the right of respect and dignity to be fulfilled. The 'refugee' tag is important for providing legal protection, but it should not be equated with disempowerment, nor should it conceal those vulnerable hosts who are not refugees but may be in equal need of assistance.

## **Wider Implications of the Role of Hosting Refugees**

What implications, if any, does the hospitality of Lebanese communities have for thinking about the nature of humanitarianism, relations between communities and the state, and between communities and the international?

It should first be noted that such hospitality is rooted in the history and culture of the region – the Ottoman response to dispossession and forced migration was internally managed, decentralized and dependent on complicity of local communities. As Dawn Chatty describes, "There were no internment or holding camps; rather than trying to provide basic emergency aid in a fixed location, the Ottoman state encouraged local communities to assist this flow of humanity and to provide hospitality to the largely Muslim 'brothers.'" And this manner of providing decentralized assistance has reinforced pre-existing social, political, and economic networks across the borders of the Arab states, even after the demarcation of states through the Sykes-Picot agreement, which was an arrangement between representatives from the British and French governments to divide the Middle East into areas where those countries would influence.

The Syrian refugee crisis finds the international refugee architecture, the UNHCR, placed at a precarious juncture of its life, in a world struggling to find a balance between sovereign power, international institutions and private actors. Host community support is notable since it disrupts notions of hierarchical power structures, and provides a persuasive picture instead of horizontal networks of support and knowledge, which either operates autonomously from, or alongside more 'formal' vertical structures. Individual humanitarian initiatives, which are motivated by reciprocity or mutual understanding, highlight the possibility of a humanitarianism which moves away from paternalism or patronage and instead focuses on a more equal power dynamic between giver and receiver. This moves closer to the concept of 'hospitality' envisioned by Wilson, as a means to 'protect the unprotected' by "conceiving the relationship between state and individual in more fluid, mutually beneficial and mutually obligated ways." Wilson (2010) argues for a manner of protection which does not place the rights of individuals and the rights of states in opposition to one another, but rather sees them as relational.

These notions of reciprocal 'exchange', rather than top-down beneficence practiced by the development industry, are beginning to permeate concepts of aid giving – South-South development cooperation, such as that practiced by China and India, rejects hierarchical 'donor-recipient' relationships and insists on mutual opportunities. The example of host communities spontaneously adding their individual support to collective humanitarianism distorts this previous detachment from incorporating localised settings into refugee humanitarianism. It emphasises the greater sustainability of refugee humanitarianism channelled through existing structures within a host setting. The relational basis for viewing the refugee within a community has implications for the manner in which aid to refugees is distributed. It blurs the boundary between the 'guest' and 'host', or the 'disempowered' and 'empowered' and allows for greater flexibility over who 'deserves' assistance, which encompasses vulnerable members of the host community alongside the refugee population. In this respect it interrupts the fixed notions of humanitarianism assumed by contemporary discourse: that of a binary between actors who are subjects, who have the tools of emancipation; and actors who are objects, whose humanity is to be secured or restored, and who are judged incapable of helping themselves.

The role of host communities assisting refugees also has important implications for arguments about various strands of cosmopolitanism. Not only does it offer the possibility of a blurring of identity between a 'citizen of a state' and

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'citizen of humanity', but supporters of 'cosmopolitan democracy' might also be interested by the manner in which international governance interacts with individual communities. Cosmopolitan democracy seeks to connect "a more democratic form of inter-state organization" with a 'nascent global civil society'. Host communities in Lebanon are operating outside the framework of a (largely absent) state through their own internal coping mechanism, which deserves to be both supported and applauded by the international community. It seems that understanding exactly how this mechanism can be bolstered further by the international level, either through or outside the state, has important implications for the manner that inter-state organizations operate, as well as for the manner in which refugees and host communities are assisted.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the existence of extensive support among some individual Lebanese people towards Syrian refugees in certain parts of Lebanon (most notably in border regions which have existing connections between the two populations). It has taken the existence of that host community support to suggest that a form of cosmopolitanism, which I have contextualized within the Arab and Islamic tradition of hospitality, is occurring through individual acts of humanitarianism, which is operating outside the framework of the state and international humanitarian organizations. Understanding exactly how this local humanitarianism works, and whether it could or should be better supported, has important ramifications for dealing with and assisting de facto 'integration' of refugees into host communities.

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**Helen Mackreath** is a postgraduate researcher from the American University of Beirut. She has conducted research into the role of host communities providing assistance to Syrian refugees in North Lebanon for the Issam Fares Institute in Beirut. She has been published in *LA Review of Books*, *The Economist*, *openDemocracy*, and is also an editor of the *Beirut Humanities Review*.