

MIGRATION STRUGGLES ALONG THE HUMANITARIAN BORDER

Syrian Displacement in Lebanon and Ways to Travel to Europe

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This article explores migration struggles along Europe's humanitarian border in the context of Syrian displacement in Lebanon. Based on ethnographic field research it traces how humanitarian government is negotiated, appropriated and resisted in the daily struggles of individuals seeking to leave the region towards Europe. In this respect it sheds light on Syrian activism in Lebanon's humanitarian sector, strategies to get a place in a humanitarian admission programme, projects to leave the country towards Europe and decisions to stay in Lebanon. The article shows how the arbitrariness of humanitarian government is not limited to institutions or campsites but penetrates as a ruling logic the everyday of social life and contributes to zones where access to human rights is not a given, but a daily struggle.

Keywords: humanitarian border, Syrian displacement, Lebanon, ethnographic border regime analysis, migration struggles

“I don't know what to tell them anymore,” said Ghassan end of 2014 when we were sitting in our shared living room in Beirut, talking about his chances to get a visum to Europe. Should he put the threats of persecution he faces in Syria to the foreground? Or his qualifications from studying film in Damascus and working in Beirut as light designer and technician at film sets, theatres, and exhibitions? Or simply that he should also have the right to travel? Ghassan insisted that he did not want to go *tahrib*. *Tahrib* is Arabic for fleeing, running away and smuggling, and he thought he should have the right to travel on regular terms to Europe. Ghassan had studied in Damascus and fled to Lebanon in 2012 to escape the Syrian military service. During his first

years in Lebanon, he used to prolong his six-month residence permit by travelling to Istanbul for a few days. However, coming and going like this was no longer possible for him when the Lebanese government introduced new visa and residence regulations in 2015. Like most Syrians in the country, he lost regular status papers, which increased the pressure on him to leave the region.

Ghassan and I were flatmates in Zico House, a cultural centre in West Beirut, where I lived from the end of 2013 to mid-2018. At the time, I was doing research for my Ph.D. on the interplay of different humanitarian approaches in the Lebanese-Syrian context. Syrian displacement had since 2011/12 become very visible and a prevalent issue through-

out Lebanon. The country has the highest per capita ratio of refugees: On top of the Lebanese population of an estimated 4.4 million, come about 1.5 million Syrian refugees,¹ in addition to about 200,000 Palestinian refugees (Sewell 2017) as well as approximately 250,000 migrant workers from the global South (Amnesty 2019). The government prohibited the formal establishment of camps, and those displaced from Syria sought shelter across the country according to their contacts and financial means. The different displacement situations across Lebanon and the struggles of persons around me to leave the country, quickly confronted me with the question of how to relate the presumably atypical – because not obviously “humanitarian” – migration struggles to the study of *humanitarian government*.

Theoretical Perspectives on Humanitarianism as a Form of Governance

Particularly over the last one to two decades, humanitarianism has increasingly been studied as a form of governance which evolves mainly in emergency contexts, such as wars and natural catastrophies, and which basically builds (unlike human rights) not on rights-based, but on needs-based discourses (Barnett 2011; Ticktin 2011). Didier Fassin (2007a) describes humanitarian government as “being grounded in two almost opposite political figures, one governmental and one non-governmental” (ibid.: 153). In this way the humanitarian logic presents not only a justification for states to intervene, but it also opens new space for action to non-governmental actors who enter the national and international stage by appealing to humanitarian discourses (Fassin 2010, 2007a). Analysing the role of humanitarian government in the constitution of borders, William Walters (2011) describes the humanitarian border as an ensemble of practices, where differently positioned actors, governmental and non-governmental, engage and meet under the premise to save human life. Therewith the humanitarian border is not bound to a geographical border but manifests in different, externalised and internalised practices. In other words, borders can be understood as a “site of constant encounter, tension, conflict and contestation” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015:

15) and as being “[...] shaped and produced by a multiplicity of actors, movements and discourses” (ibid.). Humanitarianism has become a central paradigm to the European border regime. Analyses of the practices at the humanitarian border have so far mainly focused on the macro and meso level of policies. For example in Frontex’ use of humanitarian discourse of “saving migrants”, rescue operations at sea, hotspots and the role of refugee reception programmes (Ratfisch & Scheel 2010; Walters 2011; Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Hess & Kasperek 2017; Pallister-Wilkins 2017a, 2017b; Cuttitta 2018; Perkowski 2018).

Subjectivities of those supposed to be object of the policies of humanitarian border, have received little scholarly attention. It is rather in camp situations that anthropological studies have examined subjectivities of the displaced and subsequently critiqued the arbitrariness and the reductionist effects of humanitarian government: for triggering processes of “becoming refugee” while narratives that might help to consolidate political and historically grown identities lose relevance in front of humanitarian agencies’ distribution schemes (Malkki 1996); for functioning along a logic of “care and control” (Agier 2008); for turning, with time, political and rights-based demands into expressions of competing needs (Feldman 2012); for lacking any social or cultural meaning for the recipients (Dunn 2017) and for overlooking socio-cultural expressions of individuals (Brković 2018). While studies in camps often show how socio-cultural expressions and political aspirations exist despite the humanitarian disposition, the following analysis traces humanitarianism in an urban setting where it is embedded and intertwined in a complex governance context. Looking at intersections of these migration struggles with humanitarian government, I seek to analyse the humanitarian border (Walters 2011) as it manifests on the micro level of daily negotiations in Lebanon.

Understanding government and power with Michel Foucault as a matter of constant negotiations, I refer to migration struggles as the “daily strategies, refusals, and resistances through which migrants

enact their (contested) presence – even if they are not expressed or manifested as ‘political’ battles demanding something in particular” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 26). The research perspective of the ethnographic border regime analysis includes migration struggles into the analysis of policies and borders even though they are not institutionally organised. Focusing on negotiations among differently positioned individuals, migration is an “autonomous”, co-constituent part of the border regime. It not only responds to regulations and policies, but as it struggles for mobility, it also challenges them (Hess & Tsianos 2010; Scheel 2015; Tsianos & Kasperek 2015). Tracing the intersections of humanitarianism with migration struggles is not always evident, as those who engage in plans for onward migration are not among the most impoverished, “humanitarian” cases. This approach allows putting subjectivities of migrants in the foreground and shows how ruling logics of humanitarian government penetrate social relations and political struggles and therewith contribute to the expansion of the European migration and border regime.

In the sense of George Marcus’ multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), I will trace different trajectories and strategies as they evolved in the shadow of the unfolding war in Syria and increasing pressure to leave Lebanon and the region. Migration to Europe seemed to be an almost omnipresent issue, but it also came to me as I was often asked as a foreigner from Germany for support to go there. Starting from my daily surrounding in Beirut, the empirical material presented here consists mainly of a condensation of accounts and observations, which I gathered between 2013 and 2018 in Lebanon. Previous research on Iraqi urban displacement in Syria and Lebanon in 2010 and insights in public discourses on “the refugee crisis” in the German context further add to the empirical analysis. Following the chronology of events I will first look at processes of finding refuge in Lebanon and then trace activist engagement in the humanitarian sector, efforts to obtain a place in a regular travel programme, endeavours to leave the region on irregular routes as well as decisions to stay.

Seeking Refuge in Lebanon

Zico House lies on a central street with notorious traffic that leads from West Beirut towards downtown and the eastern parts of the city. On the upper side of the street lies the ministry of interior and at the lower part are fast-food restaurants. In the middle of the street, opposite of two big construction sites, have remained a few old Beiruti, Ottoman style houses, among them Zico House. Zico himself fought for the communist party under this name as a young man, and after the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) he turned his former family house into a cultural centre and meeting space. Artists and civil society initiatives often had their first ateliers or offices in the house; there is room for artist residencies, exhibitions, theatre shows, parties to take place and people gather, discuss politics, launch initiatives. Like this, the socio-political conjunctures of the city have always reverberated strongly in the house.

When I stayed in Zico House for the first time, in 2010, following a semester in Syria, there were almost no long-term residents in Zico house. Yet, when coming back in 2013, a lot had changed: In the rooms, where initiatives had their office and rehearsal spaces, were now people from Syria renting living space. Often they had friends staying over and as they were all displaced from Syria, hoping that it was only temporary and often looking for longer lasting solutions to live outside the country, they were spending a lot of time on their phones to observe events in Syria, keep networks and organise life in exile. Many of them had first learnt about the house through their networks in art and literature. But others lived there too, like Yusef who came to Lebanon already in 1997 as a teenager looking for work, or Zuher who married a Lebanese woman; they both had occasional jobs, but also took care of the house. Most of the residents came from Syria, but also an Iraqi graphic designer had moved to the house and other Western foreigners often stayed for a few weeks or months, working in journalism or doing artist residencies. In different constellations, we were mostly about ten persons living in the house.

In the street were a few microcosms on very little space, Lebanese residents and shop owners and many Syrians who worked on the construction sites opposite the house and the nearby fastfood restaurants. I became friends with a family from Syria, who lived nearby. The father and husband of the family, Samir, used to work in Beirut already in 1994 to 2005 to be able to marry and open a small restaurant in Syria. When he had to fear persecution by the Syrian regime, he fled with his wife and their daughter and moved to the same street in Beirut, where he used to live and work before. His former employer provided Samir and his family with shelter in his office rooms until Samir found a job close by as a concierge. Like Samir, many Syrians had already worked in Lebanon before the war and now brought their families with them. Syrian labour migration to Lebanon has a long history and hundreds of thousands of Syrians used to work as seasonal workers, on construction sites and in the service sector in Lebanon. As their number was reduced in the aftermaths of the so-called Cedar Revolution and the withdrawal of Syrian occupying forces in 2005, the renewed arrivals from Syria from 2011 onwards initially suited the demands of the Lebanese labour market (Chalcraft 2008; Turner 2015).

Lebanon provided an un-bureaucratic first refuge for displaced Syrians regardless of their social and political background. Neither being a signatory to the 1951 Geneva convention for refugees nor having a national asylum legislation, the Lebanese government allowed Syrian nationals until the end of 2014 entry on a six months valid tourist visa, renewable upon re-entering Lebanon or paying a fee of 200 USD. The Lebanese government was often criticised for not having a comprehensive strategy to cope with the massive displacement from Syria, but it kept a firm position against the establishment of official camps for the arrivals from Syria (El Mufti 2014; Hamdan & Bou Khater 2015). Meanwhile the fault lines of the conflict in Syria reverberate in Lebanon, as the question over the pro and contra Assad adds on the socio-political divisions and rivalries in the Lebanese society. Since the Lebanese civil war, which ended in 1990 with a general amnesty, soci-

etal cleavages live on and are reflected in the proportional system, which favours communalism and clientelism. The political leaders are mostly former warlords and as they balance their interests, they produce political deadlock all too often and fail to deliver public services (Leenders 2012; Zeid 2014; Rosiny 2015; Fakhoury 2016; Yahya 2016).

The non-camp policy and the informality of arrangements are crucial for understanding how Lebanon managed to receive so many refugees without a major conflict spillover. It allowed for the (re-)activation of the many familial, social, political and economic interconnections between the two societies. Accordingly, the refugees sought shelter across the country and often built upon the former settlements of seasonal workers close to villages and agricultural sites. The majority lives in regular apartments, but many also live in so-called informal settlements, including camps of makeshift tents, garages and construction sites (LCRP 2015). The dispersal of the arrivals provided Lebanese employers with a ready and cheap workforce (Turner 2015). The experiences with the Palestinian refugee camps, which became permanent and played an important role during the Lebanese civil war, are additionally an important reason why the formal set-up of refugee camps was prohibited (Sanyal 2017). Conflicts, up to warfare, occurred, but they were mainly embedded in local community structures and subsequently contained with massive military investments (ICG 2015, 2017; Carpi, Younes & AbiYaghi 2016; *Daily Star* 2017).

As numbers of refugees kept rising, the labour market was more than saturated, and as Europe showed little solidarity in receiving refugees, public opinion grew tenser, and the government sought measures to reduce the numbers of refugees on its territory (Dionigi 2016). On January 5, 2015, the Lebanese government introduced restrictions to border crossings and residence regulations for Syrian nationals. These define two major categories: Syrians registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) needing to sign a pledge not to work, and Syrians with a Lebanese national as “sponsor”, usually being the employer. Both residence statuses are

very difficult to obtain, which is by large due to the non-transparent and arbitrary handling of regulations by the Lebanese authorities. These regulations in fact formalise the informality of the displacement situation in Lebanon. The operations of humanitarian organisations therefore take place in a context where legal precarity is the norm, access to labour is heavily restricted and securitisation is high (Amnesty International 2015; Janmyr 2016; Nassar & Stel 2019).

The presence of humanitarian organisations and structures was not decisive in migrants' decision where to settle. Instead, humanitarian organisations came in the next step to do needs assessments, register "beneficiaries" and provide their services. Generally, the presence of humanitarian actors and programmes often rises quickly in the context of "emergencies" and military conflicts (Calhoun 2010; Pandolfi & Rousseau 2016; De Lauri 2018). Nevertheless there is no clear-cut humanitarian regime, but regimes – refugee, border, security, labour and others – intersect in different ways and sometimes are embedded, overlapping, functioning "hand in hand", create frictions and are conflicting with each other (Betts 2010; Tsianos & Kasperek 2015). This is also the case in Lebanon, where the situation appears particularly chaotic as the operations of humanitarian actors are neither confined to demarcated areas nor comprehensively coordinated. In the absence of effective state coordination mechanisms, UNHCR took up a leading role in coordinating a variety of organisations, including inter-state organisations and international NGOs, established Lebanese NGOs and also newly founded Syrian-Lebanese associations (Mitri 2014; Shibli 2014).

Engaging in the Humanitarian Sector

Upon arriving in Beirut, in 2013/14, I met many people I knew from Damascus and its surroundings and through these "old" contacts I met many new persons. In nearby Hamra, with its bars and cafés, was a vibrant atmosphere of activism. Beirut had become a place to connect and reconnect with each other, to observe what was going on in Syria, to possibly support the opposition, to engage in activism, work in journalism, mingle with the international

scene of NGOs, journalists and "humanitarians". Some activists were already engaged in Syria for the sake of the revolution. Others just started given the deteriorating war, the displacement and the liberties for civil society engagement in Lebanon. Much support was delivered informally in support networks among friends and family members, but also many initiatives and associations were set up.

The inclusion of local stakeholders and implementing partners is a declared aim of international organisations. Nevertheless, donor organisations in the humanitarian sector demand a certain degree of professionalisation, including, for example, proposal and report writing skills, administration and English proficiency. Yet, while in Lebanon proposal-writing workshops are offered with Western funding, actual efforts to overcome the hegemony of operating standards and to assure an equitable exchange of different approaches and cultures are scarce. While internationals often praise Syrian activists for their knowledge and contacts on the ground, these activists have repeatedly raised critique that their expertise is not sufficiently acknowledged (Zakharia & Knox 2014). So complained a Syrian journalist in Beirut about international organisations: "They make long research about what we know already. They ask for assessments and information, we give it to them, but when we ask for information they tell us that they can't give it to us."² Despite expertise, engagement and eloquence of local activists and NGO workers, there are vast differences between international and local employees when it comes to job opportunities, payment, privileges and protection. In Lebanon, Syrians are officially not allowed to register NGOs or businesses in their names, and formal registration of associations is usually bound to cooperation with Lebanese passport holders. Moreover, Syrians are also drastically underrepresented in decision-making processes and forums of international institutions that deal with the conflict in Syria and its consequences (Mhaissen 2016).

As the Lebanese state's provision of public services is rather rudimentary, the private sector, political parties and NGOs are the more active in the provision of basic services and social welfare.

The Lebanese society is used to running NGOs, receiving funds from foreign donors, and the large private sector as well as the communal welfare often fill the gap in the provision of social services (Cammett 2014; Carpi 2016). By contrast, in Syria, under the Assads, civil society activism and organisations have been rigorously oppressed for decades. For example, when hundreds of thousands of Iraqis arrived in Syria in 2006/07, international humanitarian NGOs were barely allowed, and their approval required close cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) (Hoffmann 2016; Schmelter 2012). Consequently, possible civil society activists did not have many occasions for dealing with international donors and the formalities of NGO set-ups, proposal and report writing. Lebanon then offered ample opportunities to productively and creatively setting up community support networks, providing relief to those displaced and sending support to opposition-held areas via cross-border operations. Some of the new initiatives were rather short-lived, others developed into properly registered NGOs, partly also becoming official implementing partners in the UN-coordinated “response”.³

Syrians working with or running grass-roots associations in the humanitarian field have repeatedly stressed that their relief and educational activities are strictly humanitarian, and hence free from political or religious bias. Nevertheless, the reference to humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality is often a precondition for activists to receive international humanitarian funding. Emphasising neutrality might be particularly relevant given that it is common among all the parties to the conflict in Syria to provide humanitarian services according to political affiliations. The Assad regime deliberately deploys access to humanitarian provisions as a weapon of war and has with sieges and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, repeatedly disregarded international conventions. Yet, by cooperating with the Assad administration and channelling funds through its agencies, the UN-lead response supports the regime and falls far behind its self-proclaimed principles of neutrality and impartiality (Leenders & Mansour

2018; Martínez & Eng 2016; The Syria Campaign 2016). The insistence on these humanitarian principles obscures in this context rather the actual inflictions to the conflict and has a patronising effect on grass-root initiatives whose access to funding often depends on their ability to meet this humanitarian discourse.

The inclusion of local stakeholders and NGOs into international governance structures does not merely provide civil society actors with agency and empowerment, but it is also a way of expanding zones of influence, spreading a certain discourse and administrative procedures (Hess & Karakayali 2007). With the term “anti-politics”, James Ferguson (2006) analyses the spread of bureaucracy that often comes along with so-called development projects. Accordingly, the adherence to numerous administrative procedures and operating standards undermines political demands and constitutes as an exercise of power – well apart from the proclaimed programme goals – the actual outcome (Ferguson 2006). In a similar vein, Arundhati Roy (2014) describes in “The NGO-isation of Resistance” how activists and social movements lose political momentum in the course of fundraising and professionalisation. In the process of NGO-isation resistance turns into salaried jobs and “[i]n the long run, NGOs are accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among” (Roy 2014: 1). Moreover, positions in NGOs are not subject to a democratic election process, and the majority of NGOs do not have access to international forums (Demirovic 2003).

In addition to these anti-politics, the activists are also affected by the “politics of life” (Fassin 2007b, 2009), which are characteristic to humanitarian government. Unlike biopolitics, which are primarily concerned with the regulation of population, the politics of life are about “life as such”. Politics of life attribute different values to human life and create hierarchies among human lives – among others by creating a dichotomy of “lives to be risked” and “lives to be saved” (Fassin 2007b: 500). Activists can find themselves in both these categories: Engaging with international humanitarian organisations Syrian activists find opportunities to receive fund-

ing, grow their networks and to pursue individual careers. Thereby, however, they are also affected by the hierarchies within this field, which manifest in differing salaries and security measures as well as in whose expertise or engagement is acknowledged, remunerated and represented (Fassin 2007b). Meanwhile, restricted visa regulations along with labour restrictions increased the pressure to leave and to save themselves. For example earlier some Syrians in Lebanon were employed with humanitarian organisations or worked at least on a project basis with them, but this got more restricted by the end of 2014 to preserve properly paid NGO jobs for Lebanese nationals (conversations in Beirut 2014/15; Knutsen 2014).

With the continuation of the war and vanishing prospects for return activists thus became increasingly preoccupied with looking for migration possibilities outside the region. In Jordan Rana Khoury (2017) has observed how organisations have developed strategies to circumvent restrictions for regular employment, by finding alternative ways for remuneration – one of these ways being “generous travel stipends” (ibid.: 279). Also in Beirut, I had the impression that Syrian activists with contacts to the international scene had more chances to find individual travel opportunities and were thus often among the first who travelled to Europe. Those who managed to stay, with the attitude to keep fighting for their cause, helping others and not wanting to ask for asylum in Europe, were in minority. Activism in the Syrian-Lebanese context empowered and provided possibilities to take up responsibilities only to a very limited extent. It did not build up a new political elite, or, as observed in the context of Serbian internal displacement, “apolitical local community leaders” (Thiemann 2018), but rather developed into a lack of representation for the refugee community.

Looking for Regular Travel Opportunities

Ghassan tried almost everything to find ways to travel to Europe. He sought to find exchange opportunities through his work with theatres, through a scholarship or a place in a humanitarian admission programme. He did not see his future in Lebanon,

even though he managed well to find different jobs, for example on film sets, in the set-up of exhibitions or also with a theatre project in a refugee camp. He had entrepreneurial skills, improved his work engagements and contacts in Beirut, was alert of possible migration programmes and would carefully stage his story to people who might be of help in his travel plans. Yet, finding regular travel opportunities proved very difficult. Similarly, many others were weighing their possibilities to leave the region. The neighbouring family with whom I had become friends, put a lot of hope in the possibility to emigrate through UNHCR. But already in the summer of 2014, the family’s father, Samir, complained, “I feel like a sheep when I have to go to UNHCR.” They considered accepting offers to pay someone for putting their file into a better position. Friends and random acquaintances approached me for advice how to travel to Germany, assuming that I, as a German, might have better connections (*wasta*) or just the right habitus and savoir faire to enhance chances with embassy appointments, access to scholarships and travel opportunities. My possibilities to help in making such journeys happen were however very limited and needing to explain this was often frustrating. Basically, I could only effectively support processes that were already underway, when for example helping with paperwork or activating contacts on the route.⁴

In the first years, there was still hope for a conflict settlement that would make room for the coexistence of Syria’s different people. However, as the war in Syria steadily deteriorated and the displacement situation turned increasingly protracted, the worries about getting stuck in Lebanon without future perspectives, but with a precarious legal status and a volatile regional conflict-constellation, grew. EU members states looked at the unfolding conflict as very far away, opting for “regional solutions” and also UNHCR only started advocating for more international solidarity and the establishment of reception programmes when the displacement turned increasingly protracted in 2013/14. A shared international reception programme comparable to the Iraqi resettlement programme, within which Western states

resettled more than 100,000 Iraqi refugees out of the regional host states between 2007 and mid-2010 (Wilkes 2010), has not been established, but national governments have provided humanitarian admission programmes. For refugees from Syria, Germany offered 20,000 places through federal humanitarian admission programmes (HAP). Additionally, the regional states implemented humanitarian admission programmes which, however, required relatives living in Germany at least since 2013 and having a German passport or a regular residency to guarantee for the living costs (Pro Asyl 2014; UNHCR 2014).

Eligibility criteria in the Iraqi resettlement programme focused primarily on those who were considered vulnerable persons – mainly widows and women-headed households, victims of torture etc. (IRIN 2010). When I was doing interviews on displacement experiences in Damascus and Beirut in 2009/10, Iraqis in daily life situations often refused to call themselves “refugees”, as this term is associated with victimhood and the loss of agency. Nevertheless, they would often show pictures of injuries and marks of torture to me. The logic of vulnerability as a selection criterion prompted Iraqis to carefully stage their war traumas and vulnerabilities and deploy their refugee identity strategically when approaching the refugee regime – a phenomenon that Guilia El Dardiry (2014) describes as “theatrics of suffering”. Omar Dewachi (2015) further demonstrates how the importance of vulnerability as a criterion prolongs the humanitarian logic even into the social realm where the presentation of traumatic stories and war wounds are part of strategies to gather support for the migration projects.

The humanitarian admission programmes for Syrians differed among the reception states but generally put more emphasis on pre-existing contacts and qualifications than the Iraqi resettlement programme. One of the main criteria of the German humanitarian admission programme was the potential for integration (*Integrationsfähigkeit*), which regards family relations as well as the educational background. Contacts and qualifications thus played a more significant role, and while the programme also foresaw to take a certain number of medical

cases, it did not define specific vulnerabilities as the primary selection criterion (Caritas 2019). The discourse of pity seemed to play a minor role, as Syrians were preoccupied with managing their lives in exile, finding opportunities to work and study, maintaining family bonds, networking and figuring out possible future perspectives. How programme designs and the definition of vulnerability criteria influence discourses was also shown in research on the protection programme for LGBTs from Syria, which triggered the deployment of group-specific narratives of threat and protection in interview situations (Saleh 2020).

Resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes open possibilities for migration. Such programmes are not based on rights-based criteria, but on eligibility and vulnerability criteria which trigger corresponding discourses. Drawing on cases where medical attestations brought a residence permit while regular asylum claims were refused, Didier Fassin (2010) and Miriam Ticktin (2011) show how “humanitarian exceptions” lead to a dichotomy of compassion versus rights, which undermines the rights-based access to asylum systems in Europe. This differentiation between those eligible and those not eligible happens on the bases of non-transparent and non-rights-based criteria. While it includes a certain number of persons, as a mechanism for migration control it excludes even more persons (Ratfisch & Scheel 2010). So-called status determination procedures are thus an integral part of the border and migration regime. There is no right to a place and decisions of who is allowed to access spaces where legal rights are attributed, might be arbitrary as decisions are made on the basis of needs assessments and a programme’s eligibility criteria (Cuttitta 2018).

The duality of humanitarian and legalist approaches adds to an increasing differentiation of residence permit statuses, categories and labels (Zetter 2007; Janmyr & Mourad 2018). Practices of labelling and status determination are one aspect in which border struggles revolve around institutional policies. These do not just govern movements of migration, but migrants themselves deal actively with these policies, for example, when deploying a

discourse of vulnerability or highlighting specific qualifications, according to the programme criteria. Even though individuals prove therewith a strategic handling of such categories, the related discourses spread nevertheless into social relations and affect self-perceptions. Presenting individual cases in terms of competing needs undermines political struggles and rights-based claims. Despite trying everything from deploying contacts to providing suitable files in order to get a place in a humanitarian admission programme, frustrations were rising: The number of available places did by far not meet the demand and it was often incomprehensible on which bases rejections happened. When realising that regular migration routes are hardly available, many Syrians started to look for irregular ways to Europe.

Travelling and Resisting Migration Containment

On the first floor in Zico House, Wissam and Qusay shared a small flat and were hosting at least one or two other persons most of the time. Particularly during the nights of Ramadan 2015 we were often hanging out together. This summer, they and others in the house and the neighbourhood spent much time discussing their travel plans. Leaving Lebanon appeared to be the way out of a notoriously unstable region and a country which media outlets often portrayed as being at the verge of humanitarian respectively political collapse. Thinking about future perspectives appeared almost synonymous with plans for migration. In the summer of 2015, migration to Europe was the talk of the town: How to travel? Where to go? With whom? For how much money? In how many days? Friends and also random encounters asked me time and again about Germany and the possibilities to go there. In the end, the actual decision-making seemed to happen in social networks and social media channels, where information on policies and regulations concerning the travel routes were circulating and family and friends were helping out with the logistics and lending money.⁵

Still, despite all the difficulties in Lebanon, would the disrupted social structures, asylum procedures, residency restrictions and the inconveniences of becoming a foreigner, make the risky travels to

Europe worthwhile? “We want to go on with our lives. We want to work, study, marry and live in peace,” explained Qusay to me. Access to education, work opportunities, a social welfare system and possibilities for family reunification played a vital role in their considerations. In August 2015, Qusay travelled with a small group of friends over Turkey and the Balkans to Europe. At the last moment Wissam decided not to go, as he had received a scholarship that allowed him to continue his Arabic literature studies in Beirut. Unfortunately, a year later, in 2016, the authority in charge of visa and residence regulations, got track of the fact that he had also worked for a French news channel, which was not allowed with his student visa, and his residence permit was concurrently not prolonged. Being very worried about the risk of deportation to Syria Wissam left via Sudan to Istanbul without having finished his studies. Ghassan who had managed to make money and rent a flat somewhere else in Hamra also left the country. Despite his principles of not going *tahrib*, he probably had no other option than arranging for irregular travels. It was not the immediate survival but rather the bleak perspectives for livelihood in Lebanon respectively in the region and an idea of better living conditions with rights and dignity that motivated hundreds of thousands to leave the region for Europe.

That summer of 2015 Syrians and other nationalities arrived in unprecedented numbers over the so-called Balkan route to Europe. European media were talking of “the refugee crisis” and suggested that more humanitarian assistance would be essential to provide perspectives for refugees in the region. Though many families depended on humanitarian assistance, the people who left were able to raise the money for the journey. The media interest was high, and Syrians not only presented the largest group among the arrivals but also seemed to be the refugee group par excellence. They fitted the narrative of the “legitimate” refugee. The war – arguably the best documented conflict – has made headlines over the years, and in 2014/15 the sudden advances of Da’esh in northeast Syria and Iraq once more captured public attention with meticulously staged imageries of carnage and belligerence. Fleeing this violence in the

public eye needed protection. The threat through Da'esh went up to the point that it was discussed in European media if the Assad regime – which has remained the primary perpetrator of war crimes in Syria – is not the smaller evil in a conflict with ever-new layers of complexity. Measures to prevent people from leaving the region emphasised humanitarian provisions and military engagement against Da'esh – and sometimes even suggested repatriation despite Assad still being in power.

Such discourse not only fails to recognise the actual suffering of those who needed to flee, but it also misses to acknowledge their political identities. Ticktin (2016) remarks on the political grammar in migration discourse: “[...] it seems the only subject position available to those who are not trying to build fences or walls is ‘humanitarian’” (ibid.: 255). In this sense humanitarian discourse recognises suffering only against an assumed blueprint of innocence: it attributes innocence to those being cared for, being protected and being saved. However, the necessary pendant, guilt, is on the other side of the pendulum that “can swing quickly between the two” (ibid.: 259). This binary conception of innocence and guilt leaves “no space for the experiences of life” (ibid.: 157) and the in-between of the political struggles and aspirations. Therefore, humanitarian discourse at the border (as in camps) does not provide space for a narrative that revolves around the ideals of the revolution, such as freedom, justice, rights and dignity, nor does it acknowledge the daily struggles and hardships of war and displacement.

Emergencies, like a “refugee crisis”, are instances when compassion and humanitarian parole typically are expressed. Emergency modes bring sudden attention, yet it might ebb away quickly and obstruct the view of on-going conditions. Concerning moral economies, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) compare how suffering and psychological harm are acknowledged, treated and “rewarded” by the international humanitarian system in case of violent conflicts and natural disasters. The recognition of suffering has become essential for remunerations and access to assistance, which however is not equally available to all. The emergency mode and

the politics of life put some humanitarian situations to the forefront of international attention while obscuring others. This contributes to hierarchies on a global level, of whose suffering and whose demands for support are heard, recognised and addressed.

Displacement situations are by nature often provisory, and established structures for mobilisation have often – if existent before – been uprooted too. The “summer of migration” is therefore also analysed as a “nonmovement”. Asef Bayat (2010: 14) describes nonmovements as “[...] the collective action of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations.” Likewise, the movements of migration to Europe were not collectively organised but have circumvented the border regime by activating individual networks and resources. It was the sum of actions, which developed a force that lead to a temporary breakdown of the Dublin system, caused a crisis to the European border regime and raised demands for social inclusion, democracy and rights by “voting with the feet” (Kasperek & Schmidt-Sembdner 2016; Hess & Karakayali 2017).

Similarly these movements of migration can be understood as a form of resistance towards the prospect of living in a condition of looming war shaped by politics of life (Schmelter 2015). Nevertheless, leaving a humanitarian condition in Lebanon behind, migrants travelling on irregular ways to Europe are likely to have encountered the humanitarian border on their way. For example at rescue situations at sea, at hot spots in Greece, in camps and detention facilities on the way or when applying for a residence permit (Walters 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b). While many of the migrants have managed to overcome these borders and found their way to Europe, institutions of the European border regime have expanded repressive policies. These include border technologies, deals with possible transit states, the militarisation of borders, new camp models and high investments in humanitarian programmes.

Staying in Lebanon

When the summer had passed, the migration season also slowly came to an end. In autumn 2015 Beirut seemed emptier. Many faces I used to see randomly in Hamra were not around any longer. These departures were reportedly more noticeable in Beirut than, for example, in the Bekaa-Valley, as life in the city is costly but holds more possibilities to prepare for the journey. While many had left even more had stayed in Lebanon and the region. Among those having stayed in Beirut prevailed a sense of stagnation: Leaving Lebanon towards Europe had become more complicated and at the same time living conditions in Lebanon turned increasingly precarious. More and more Syrians lost regular status papers, amounting to an estimated 70–75 percent in 2018 (HRW 2018; UNHCR 2018), which exposed them to arbitrary arrests, possible deportations and various social and economic risks (IRC & NRC 2015). Syrians face enormous obstacles to develop reliable livelihood prospects in Lebanon. The UN even reported about increased suicide rates and cases of schizophrenia (McVeigh 2016), which I also saw weighing heavily on young men whose personal projects, pressure in Beirut and possible trauma from the war in Syria seemed too much of a burden.

My neighbours, Samir and Nour, had actively planned to leave Lebanon towards Germany – by going to UNHCR, inquiring about their file, establishing contacts and discussing the details of the journey via Turkey and Greece with their relatives in Syria. However, after long nights of planning and discussion, the family decided not to join their relatives in travelling to Germany, as they were worried about the risks of crossing the sea. In the end, they lent the money they had forseen for their own journey to their relatives and stayed in Beirut. Not having been part of Europe’s “refugee crisis” the family remains largely off European public attention. They have neither arrived in Europe as asylum seekers nor do they fit the mainstream reporting of the poor conditions of refugee life in Lebanon. In their small concierge flat in Hamra, they show me pictures of relatives who started a new life in Germany and pictures of relatives who disappeared and

later died in Syria’s prisons. Nour sighs, “It should have been us who travelled. We have been here for three years now.”⁶ Even though they stay connected via social media, their traditional networks of social and family life have been destroyed and uprooted. Making sense of events is more difficult in a scattered community and thus the effects of the humanitarian government with the needs-based narrative also manifest in the urban settings of Lebanon: political narratives got disrupted, the revolution is heavily battered, and people are busy to ensure their existence.

The family manages a decent living in Lebanon, but making ends meet is a daily challenge. Unlike many others, they could regularise their stay. Yet, as it is often the case even the members of the same, small family have different legal status: Wife and daughter remained registered with UNHCR, which requires a pledge not to work in Lebanon and prevents them from possible travels to the grandparents in Syria. A year after they had decided to stay, Nour fell ill and was in a life-threatening condition in hospital where she had an abdominal surgery. For the treatment costs, they got support from UNHCR, and tried to get the remaining costs covered by faith-based charities and also paid from their savings. Samir was glad to receive a sponsorship (*kafala*) by his employer at the end of 2015. This *kafala* system is heavily criticised for allowing exploitation and increasing dependencies on the sponsor who is in most cases the employer (Jones & Ksaifi 2016). Also Samir complains about his working conditions, “we live like slaves here” – referring to the lack of choice for the job he does, the small, dark flat they inhabit and the constant need to be at disposition for the building’s residents of the house.⁷ Nevertheless, as their daughter advances in school, he prepares himself to work even more to cover the rising tuition fees. He is anxious for his health and explains: “The most difficult things are if you get sick and to ensure an education.”⁸

Over the years, the Syrian regime advanced with its allies, destroying opposition strongholds and also bringing its allies in Lebanon into a stronger position. As Lebanon remained relatively stable, it received

much praise for its exceptional coping mechanisms and resilience of the population. Yet, the institutional ambiguity in managing the displacement, is not just an unfortunate by-product of weak and overwhelmed state structures but a deliberate governance strategy of creating protection gaps that aim at preventing refugees to stay permanently and at reducing their number on Lebanese territory (Nassar & Stel 2019). Trying to mitigate the human suffering while at the same time seeking the cooperation of state authorities, humanitarian organisations are all too often complicit to policies that undermine rights, facilitate exploitation and purport politics of migration containment. In this condition – and in view of increasing deportations (Chehabey & Sewell 2019) – protests are barely publically formulated, yet among Syrians in daily life, critique of current regulations and insufficient protection can be heard in countless instances.

Conclusion

Following trajectories of people in Beirut showed that their migration struggles along the humanitarian border are often ambiguous as they move between engagement and careers, individual travel opportunities, securing a family life and the claims for rights. Migration struggles therefore cannot be seized with binary schemes of innocence and guilt, agency and helplessness, being well off and in need of protection. Voices are often torn between critique towards prevailing policies, working with them pragmatically and improvising to work around existing regulations. While the arrival in Lebanon initially built strongly on personal agency and contacts, the politics of life, in the course of the displacement situation, have structured the prospects for onward migration and life in Lebanon on different levels.

By referring to humanitarian discourse, activists find opportunities to work with organisations in the field, gain agency and access to humanitarian organisations and the international humanitarian scene. Therewith they belong to the category of those who can risk their lives for others, but also within these categories hierarchies persist.

Concerning employment in the humanitarian sector activists face underrepresentation in international forums and restrictions by national law. Belonging at the same time to the community of those whose lives ought to be saved, they are also concerned to save themselves and to use opportunities to leave the region. The deteriorating conditions in Syria, restrictive migration policies and anti-politics have over time diffused the momentum of civil society activism. By stressing the neutrality of their action, adhering to operational standards and professionalising their engagement, activists often lose political momentum, while eased travel opportunities contribute additionally to a lack of representation for the refugee community in the host states.

Deploying vulnerability discourse strategically to get a place in a humanitarian admission programme and more broadly access to humanitarian assistance, feeds into a dichotomy of compassion versus rights, shifting thus political struggles towards individual cases and narratives of needs and suffering. Furthermore, it spreads into social realms and, to some extent, self-perceptions of suffering. While politics of compassion might be beneficial in single cases, they undermine on a broader scope rights-based demands and political struggles. The arbitrariness of selection criteria, different programme outlines and the lack of sufficient places to meet the demand, left people wondering what they would need to present for being recognised as “eligible” and finally brought many to take risks to travel.

Those who leave the region to arrive as “refugees” on irregular ways to Europe are often not the most impoverished, but those who want to avoid getting stuck in a humanitarian condition. They often invest their savings and mobilise their contacts, to find more stable living conditions outside the region. Looking for something more than mere survival, these movements of migration resist this administration of suffering. Even though they carry the demands of the revolution for rights, freedom and dignity as a non-movement further, they are very likely to encounter other manifestations of the humanitarian border on the way, such as in

situations of rescue, detention, selection processes and the recognition of their cases.

Humanitarian government in Lebanon does not evolve in a campsite, but in a context of large-scale regional containment where it adds to “processes of zoning and fragmentation of citizenship rights at the fringes of Europe” (Hess 2012: 8). As humanitarian government in Lebanon evolves in the city and the country, without being confined to a specific lieu, it intersects with different realms of life and obscures its ways of functioning. Even among those who stayed many had struggled on a daily basis to find a way to leave: by seeking information on possible travels, applying at UNHCR, establishing relevant contacts, making plans to leave on irregular ways etc. Thereby their struggles intersected on different instances with humanitarian government and thus with a part of the European migration and border regime. Similar to the observations made in camps, humanitarian government triggers processes of dehistoricisation and depoliticisation also in Lebanon and beyond, and adds to the fragmentation of political identities, social networks and shared narratives concerning the revolution.

The externalised border policies that prevent possible migrants from accessing the EU are often directed to faraway countries in order to prevent the arrival in possible transit states. Turkey’s introduction of visa requirements for Syrians in January 2016 reduced the travels of Syrians from Lebanon and moreover took away one of the rare possible grounds for family meetings. Deals with states such as Libya, Turkey, Lebanon and others suggest that the paradigm of good governance, as demanding the adherence to human rights standards, has become subordinate to the goal of migration containment. The domination of ruthless authoritarianism and the opposition’s defeat in Syria are reflected in international negotiations as liberal governance models, and the power of international normative frameworks erode.

The war in Syria reverberates far beyond the country and the region (Harling 2016; Synaps 2018) and the politics in the aftermaths of the summer

of migration have accelerated the logic of containing people to the region, paying humanitarian programmes and closing the eyes towards corruption, and an erosion of rights. Despite raging war and political repression in the region, Lebanon has maintained relative stability.⁹ Not only international “humanitarians” continue to operate in the country, but the number of foreigners from the West who come to Lebanon to do research, work, study Arabic, be a tourist or participate in international conferences, increased at least since 2015. In the meantime, visa requirements by the EU and the US have become even stricter, which does not only affect possible asylum seekers but also results in Lebanese academics having to miss out on international conferences. This asymmetry in travel opportunities is very present in different encounters and situations, where the issue of a single Schengen visa demands so much struggle and endurance from most Syrians.

Over the years, living and working conditions turned more restrictive and exploitive and deportations to Syria have become a tangible threat. Regarding the humanitarian border Ticktin (2016: 265) writes: “Perhaps more importantly, in its current, institutionalized forms humanitarianism actually maintains *inequality*, in that it separates out two populations: those who can feel and act on their compassion and those who must be the subjects (or objects) of it; those who have the power to protect and those who need protection.” Examining humanitarianism in the Syrian context of war and protracted displacement suggests that humanitarianism not only maintains, but increases inequality. It contributes to regime maintenance, while it intertwines with economic interests and security considerations of the host governments. Looking at migration struggles along the humanitarian border in Lebanon has shown on the one hand how humanitarian government expands into social life and undermines political activism. On the other hand, it made clear how the humanitarian dispositive falls short to grasp the actual struggles of migrants encountering the humanitarian border.

Notes

- 1 The numbers are largely based on estimates as a recent official census is not available (the last census in Lebanon dates back to 1932). The Syrian refugees in Lebanon registered with UNHCR passed the one million mark in April 2014. Beginning of 2015 the Lebanese government introduced new visa and residence regulations. In consequence most Syrians in the country lost regular status papers. In May 2015 the government imposed a registration stop on UNHCR. UN estimates mention 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon out of which a bit less than a million were registered with UNHCR in 2018 and almost 880,000 in October 2020 (UNHCR 2020).
- 2 Conversation, Beirut, October 28, 2014.
- 3 *SAWA for Development and Aid and Basmah wa Zeitoune* present two examples of organisations that started as grassroots initiatives and have become well established NGOs.
- 4 For example, helping with paper work for the embassy, connecting with advocacy groups in Greece or arranging for travels as described in the reportage “Odysee zum rettenden Aufnahmeprogramm” (Schmelter 2016).
- 5 For example, when talking about collecting money from family members, gathering information from people who had already passed the route, building a group for travelling and planning the different stages of the journey.
- 6 Conversation in winter 2016.
- 7 Conversation in autumn 2017.
- 8 Conversation in July 2018.
- 9 This applies to the time until autumn 2019. In October 2019 mass protests started decrying the corruption of the government and the economic crisis. The Lebanese lira, officially pegged to the US-dollar, rapidly lost value, pushing large parts of society into – often severe – poverty. Holding to its power, the political elite continues to hinder necessary reforms and possible bail-out programmes. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, have strained the situation additionally. Hit by multiple crisis, in 2020 people from all societal groups consider their options of leaving or staying in Lebanon.

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