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Refugee mobilisation to support refugee rights in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey

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Refugee-led initiatives supporting refugee communities in the Middle East have developed in different ways in response to an often restrictive policy environment. The international humanitarian and research communities should acknowledge the capacity of these initiatives and find ways to listen to, learn from and collaborate with them more effectively.

The literature on community mobilisation has been expanding in recent years, with a particular focus on refugee communities. This reflects the ‘localisation of aid’ agenda promoted at the 2016 UN World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), and the UN’s growing recognition of the role played by local actors and refugee leaders. It also links in with the ‘Grand Bargain’ (launched at the WHS) which aims to enhance the effectiveness of the humanitarian response by strengthening local humanitarian actors’ capacities and providing them with greater access to funding and information. Likewise, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees placed an emphasis on enhancing refugee self-reliance and recognising the value of refugee participation in decision-making.

The paradigm shift in humanitarian funding towards more inclusive and development-focused approaches prompted humanitarian actors and private donors to fund refugee-led organisations (RLOs), encouraging them to become self-reliant. However, there has been limited research on the experiences of RLOs in the Middle East¹ and the strategies they employ to claim their rights and challenge power asymmetries in host countries and within the international humanitarian system.

To explore this issue, we looked at refugee mobilisation within local, national and international ecosystems, focusing on the diverse policy environments of the Middle East. This allowed us to better understand the structures that refugees have created and the role they have been able to play. Through 18 months of desk research, mapping, field research, interviews, focus groups and comparative analysis in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, we identified

a total of 336² refugee-led responses of various patterns and types, including a limited number of registered RLOs in addition to a much wider range and greater number of less visible and typically smaller RLOs.

The findings of our research informed the development of the following definition of an RLO relevant to the context of the Middle East:

*An RLO is an organised, formal or informal response initiated, led or managed by a forcibly displaced person(s) to provide the community with humanitarian, socioeconomic, cultural and/or protection services.*³

RLOs in the Middle East: present and active despite restrictive policies

The three countries included in this study have different policies towards refugees – policies that have been developed in response to changing power dynamics, international relations and shifting interests.

In Jordan, non-Jordanians are denied the right to form civil society entities; even if just one of the members of such an entity is non-Jordanian, the organisation must have special prime ministerial consent which is extremely difficult to obtain. Refugees in Jordan are considered as ‘asylum seekers’ (Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention) and therefore refugees are denied the right to organise as non-Jordanians.

In Lebanon, policies affecting different refugee groups are constantly changing. Foreign organisations⁴ follow a registration process established by special decree issued by the Council of Ministers. An RLO follows the same registration procedure as a local NGO. However, it is important to note that Syrians, Palestinians and other refugees are

not allowed to create organisations and therefore have to partner with Lebanese nationals to help, protect and represent their organisation publicly before the State.

Turkish law does not draw a distinction between foreigners and Turkish citizens with regard to forming an NGO in Turkey – but there are a number of conditions that must be met in order to create a legal association or NGO in Turkey. Most importantly, the organisation must have at least seven founding members who are either Turkish or foreigners who have legal status in Turkey.

Given the restrictive regulations of host countries and the requirements of donors, the majority of RLOs are not registered, have not been able to secure external funding, and have very limited visibility beyond the communities they serve. The establishment of RLOs and the patterns of the action they undertake are determined by several factors:

- the ambiguous or restrictive policies of the host country in relation to refugee status
- the prevailing policy environment relating to registering organisations
- the level of refugees' awareness about navigating domestic laws and policies
- the social and financial capital as well as networks that refugees possess or have access to
- the support that refugees receive from international humanitarian organisations.

RLOs in action: shapes, sizes and patterns

This regulatory and policy environment has resulted in significant diversity in the forms that an RLO may take. We have grouped the various manifestations of RLOs in several layers. These layers reflect how RLO action takes shape in particular ways in response to the needs of the community, the concentration or dispersal of community members (either dispersed in large urban areas or concentrated in semi-urban or rural contexts), the availability of funding, legal status, community mobilisation structures, and access to local and international networks (that is, the ability

to liaise with established humanitarian aid organisations to coordinate services).

Layer 1 – Transnational Organisations: These are RLOs which have the capacity to work across borders by mobilising transnational networks that include refugee communities in exile. In this way, RLOs are able to widen their scope of services, increase the size of the communities they can reach, and diversify their networks with international donors. We identified five such organisations in Turkey, six in Jordan and 12 in Lebanon.

Layer 2 – Institutionalised Community Mobilisation: In this category we find RLOs that have managed to register as an organisation or a for-profit company (social enterprise) or an association, thereby institutionalising their community mobilisation. This helps them attract external funding and broaden the community they serve. Our research identified five registered organisations in Turkey, 36 in Lebanon and 80 in Jordan.

Layer 3 - Localised Community Mobilisation: This occurs when members from a refugee community are brought together by a leader or several leaders who mobilise the community through networking. Such entities are then able to have a wider outreach to refugees by securing funds and support for the community from local actors. Of these, we counted 56 in Jordan, 57 in Lebanon and 58 in Turkey.

Layer 4 – Philanthropic Individual Initiative: These initiatives represent action by a single person or a small group of people from the community who have identified a particular need and have organised themselves to respond. Such initiatives are often led by influential refugees with access to money and networks. We identified three such initiatives in Jordan, five in Lebanon and 13 in Turkey.

RLO strategies: social capital and networks to fill the gap

A defining feature of an RLO is the role of refugees in the organisation's leadership and decision-making process. As such, the legal status of refugees themselves mattered



Graffiti in the streets of Nahr el-Bared Camp in Lebanon of a young boy waving the flag of Palestine in front of the Dome of the Rock. (Credit: Watfa Najdi)

significantly in determining their ability to institutionalise and scale up their organisation – an important step in enhancing the organisation’s visibility and scope of work.

Regardless of the scale of activity, we found that all RLOs were created to fill protection and assistance gaps left by international humanitarian actors and resulting from host State policies in providing access to basic rights and services. We found that RLOs demonstrate agency through their activities in the areas of social protection and service provision, while also providing a space to maintain or recreate their homeland in exile.

RLOs were found to have had significant positive impact in their areas of activity across all 11 locations of our research. The significant impact of RLOs, whether they are small and relatively invisible or big and registered, is found to derive primarily from the strength of established relations between the members of the RLO on the one hand and members of the host community on the other. More successful RLOs have also established sustained relations

with host State officials and members of international organisations and donors. The impact of RLOs was measured through the numbers they serve, the programmes they deliver, the staff they recruit and the target objectives they meet.

Moreover, although limited in number in the Middle East, RLOs that are connected to transnational networks have had more visible impact due to their capacity to work across multiple contexts, their access to institutional actors, and their ability to receive external funding. They have also been able to communicate the effectiveness of their programmes in terms of targeted goals, planned milestones, achieved results and people reached. Their work has to serve the needs of their community while complying with donor conditionality. Meanwhile, the impact of non-registered RLOs was found to be limited to members of their immediate community and more reliant on the social networks they have established among members of the communities they serve. This impact, although non-quantifiable, was identified as

being significant and important for refugees as it helped sustain a supporting community, which in turn facilitated social protection and other forms of support.

Although it is important to recognise the impact of larger, more visible RLOs and the significant contributions they make, it is equally important not to overlook the work and role of smaller, often unregistered RLOs.

RLOs as equal partners and decision-makers

Understanding the work and impact of RLOs in the Middle East requires a deep understanding of the diverse realities of local and national refugee governance in this region, where national, regional, international and transnational actors contribute to shaping the refugee policies of each country and where the State “continue[s] traditional statist styles of governance in terms of bureaucratic rule making” and exercises power over refugees.⁵ This consequently shapes the scale of RLOs as well as their plan of work, their access to funding, and their ‘impact’.

Through this work, we sought to highlight the important role of the localised humanitarian support led by refugees, regardless of the size and registration status of their organisations. Our findings highlight the agency of refugee communities, and their ability to evaluate choices, make decisions and take action, despite a restrictive policy environment. These findings provide important evidence for policymakers, funders and practitioners to guide their engagement with various types of RLOs in the region, mindful of the diverse structures, strategies and levels of formality represented by different refugee-led responses.

More specifically, and in light of Grand Bargain commitments and the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees, donors should develop more flexible and permissive policies towards funding for RLOs, ensuring that support for RLOs is not exclusively accessible to the limited number of prominent RLOs in the region.

In response to commitments by humanitarian NGOs to localise action and transfer power to actors closest to communities in need of humanitarian assistance, humanitarian

organisations should develop innovative mechanisms to listen to, learn from and collaborate with RLOs. For this to happen, humanitarian organisations need to recognise and value the agency, knowledge, expertise and perspectives of RLOs and work to dismantle power imbalances that can hinder effective collaboration. They need to view RLOs as equal and valued partners within the community of humanitarian actors and ensure that they have equal participation in the decision-making process.

This also applies to researchers. Given the substantive benefits of participatory research led by researchers closest to the phenomenon of forced migration, researchers should involve refugees as full members of the research team from the design stage of research. They should also recognise the important contribution that RLOs can make to research, especially by identifying research needs, understanding local conditions, and navigating complex research environments.

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1. We prefer the term ‘West Asia’ rather than ‘Middle East’ as it is more accurate and geographically precise. The latter is a Eurocentric and arbitrary label that perpetuates colonial perceptions of the region and fails to acknowledge the geographical distinctions and the unique cultural identities within it. However, to be consistent with the title of this special feature, we have used ‘Middle East’ in our article.

2. This is not a comprehensive figure for all such initiatives that may exist in these countries but represents those covered in our research; however, we feel the breakdown of numbers of different types of responses reflects the relative numbers of such initiatives.

3. El Abed O, Nadjji W, Hoshmand M and Al Hamouri F (2023) ‘Refugee Communities Mobilising in the Middle East’, LERRN bit.ly/rlos-mobilising

4. The association is considered foreign if its founder or director is not Lebanese, if it is based outside Lebanon, or if more than a quarter of the members of its general assembly are foreigners.

5. Mencütek Z Ş (2020) *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East*, Routledge