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# Turning Political Activism into Humanitarian Engagement: Transitional Careers of Young Syrians in Lebanon

Léo Fourn

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*Laboratoire méditerranéen de sociologie  
UMR 7305 - Aix Marseille Université - CNRS*

« Turning Political Activism into Humanitarian Engagement: Transitional Careers of Young Syrians in Lebanon »

Power2Youth Working Paper No. 28 - April 2017

Léo Fourn, Aix-Marseille univ, CNRS, LAMES, Aix-en-Provence, France

*Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de L'Homme  
5, rue du château de l'horloge - B.P. 647 - 13094 AIX-EN-PROVENCE Cedex 2  
<http://lames.cnrs.fr/>*



# POWER2YOUTH

## Turning Political Activism into Humanitarian Engagement: Transitional Careers of Young Syrians in Lebanon

**Léo Fourn,**  
Université Aix-Marseille





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## Turning Political Activism into Humanitarian Engagement: Transitional Careers of Young Syrians in Lebanon

Léo Fourn<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*After five years of conflict, many young Syrians have fled their country to find refuge in neighbouring countries and beyond. More than one million Syrians have registered as refugees in Lebanon since 2011. Young refugees are facing many obstacles on their way out of economic, social and political exclusion. Within the significant expansion of the humanitarian field in response to the refugee crisis, young Syrians have funded their own NGOs. Based on qualitative fieldwork with members of such organizations, this paper explores how young Syrian refugees in Lebanon partially cope with barriers to integration through humanitarian work. It examines how war and exile have led to variations in activism among the young Syrians and how the hardship they are facing presents them with bleak prospects.*

**Keywords:** Lebanon | Syrian refugees | Youth | NGOs

### INTRODUCTION

The Syrian uprising started in 2011 with peaceful protest asking for political reform. From the beginning, the demonstrators faced a brutal crackdown led by the regime's security forces. The repression escalated while rebel armed groups emerged. The internationalization and radicalization of the main protagonists led to an ongoing civil war causing terrible damage and casualties. As a consequence, millions of civilians fled their homes to seek refuge in other areas inside the country and abroad.<sup>2</sup> Lebanon has sheltered more than one million Syrian refugees,<sup>3</sup> a massive influx of people which has increased the instability that was already affecting the country (Longuenesse 2015). It reawakened the memory of the arrival of the Palestinian refugees and stiffened the polarization of the political field (ICG 2012, Geisser 2013). Frontiers are becoming less relevant with the regional spillover of the Syrian crisis (ICG 2013).

The majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are facing harsh living conditions. They are confronting many obstacles that exclude them from the Lebanese society. Many Syrians in Lebanon lack legal papers. They have few opportunities to make a living. Thus, they make use of different coping strategies, mainly employment in the informal sector (Christophersen et al. 2013). The situation is getting worse, and youth are not spared.

Many studies and reports have investigated the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and other countries as well as the responses of local authorities. Nevertheless, few have studied

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<sup>1</sup> Léo Fourn is a PhD Candidate, Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology (LAMES), Université Aix-Marseille.

<sup>2</sup> See the UNHCR website: *Syria Emergency*, <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See the UNHCR website: *Syria Regional Refugee Response-Lebanon*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>.

the phenomenon of youth exile connected to the issue of civic participation. The concept of generation is used to characterize a group that participates in significant events during a specific historical period (Mannheim 1952). The Syrian youth form such a generation. On the one hand, they are a politically committed generation that has protested against authoritarianism since 2011. On the other hand, they are also a generation of victims of war and exile.

Among this generation, this paper focuses on the case of young Syrian refugees in Lebanon who are occupied in the humanitarian field - in other words, those who experience civic engagement in exile. This micro-level analysis allows us to grasp the experience of exclusion and the individual strategies used to cope with it. In contrast to the stereotype that sees migrants as passive people, this paper aims to consider the agency of young migrants and their means of empowerment through their participation in humanitarian work.

We adopted an ethnographic method based on qualitative fieldwork carried out during the month of May 2016. Everything presented in this paper is based on this ethnographic fieldwork. We focus on the case of young humanitarian activists in NGOs founded and managed by Syrians. We conducted in-depth interviews in Arabic with 20 individuals aged 18 to 35 in order to collect individual life stories. This retrospective approach enables a better understanding of present experiences. However, the diversity of the young Syrians we met does not allow us to draw a typology of standard profiles. The gender distribution of our sample was equal. One interviewee was Palestinian-Syrian. We also tried to diversify the interviews according to the roles of the actors in the organizations. A majority of the young people we met were from an urban middle-class background. Most of them have also studied at a university and are now living in Beirut. Hence, this study does not in any way represent the Syrian youth as a whole. Many Syrian youth in Lebanon are not engaged in humanitarian action and many have left the country since 2015. The main weakness of our approach is the absence of members of faith-based NGOs, which play a key role in the humanitarian field in Lebanon. In addition to the interviews, we made direct observation during our presence with the humanitarian workers in Beirut and in the Bekaa valley, which completed our picture of the situation and helped to contextualize the interviews.

The paper first describes the hardship facing Syrian youth, and the exclusion process turning them into a precarious generation. After an overview of the Syrian humanitarian actors in Lebanon, it deals with the issue of humanitarian work as a crossroads between employment and civic participation. Then, it examines the various forms of engagement that young Syrians in Lebanon have experienced, ranging from protest to humanitarian aid. Finally, it looks at the bleak prospects for Syrian youth and their desire for a better life outside Lebanon.

## **1. A PRECARIOUS GENERATION**

The young Syrians live in particularly precarious conditions in Lebanon. Their exile does not erase social disparities. Yet, it seems that all Syrian youth in Lebanon experience precariousness. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and the arrival of the first Syrian refugees, the situation of the Syrians in Lebanon has evolved substantially. The rather welcoming attitude of the Lebanese authorities towards the Syrians turned into a

policy hostile to their presence. The young Syrians experienced diverse migration patterns. Some crossed the border legally whereas others did it clandestinely. Fleeing from a war-torn country, they did not reach a completely safe haven when they arrived in Lebanon.

People whom we met reported to have been the victims, in the eastern regions of Lebanon, of harassment and kidnapping by members of a pro-Syrian regime militia. They also reported to have been arrested, jailed and sometimes expelled from the national territory by the Lebanese security forces for so-called “security” reasons (Frangieh 2014). According to the interviewees, the aim was to dissuade them, as anti-regime activists, from continuing their political activities in Lebanon. This experience contributed to distrust towards Lebanese authorities and sometimes towards international organizations. Thus, some Syrians preferred not to register their names with the UNHCR, for fear of acts of vengeance from the Syrian regime and its allies in the country.

The main cause of precariousness among the young Syrians is their legal status (Janmyr 2016). Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention regulating refugee status. Considering this, as an interviewee argued, one should not use the term “refugee” to name the Syrian migrants living in Lebanon, because it denies their lack of protective status:

We, the Syrians living here, we are not refugees. Nobody gets the right of asylum. If you want to ask for a residency permit, you are like any foreigner. No one cares about me. And for the most destitute Syrians, it is the same. It is we who are taking care of them. They are not refugees, they are poor Syrians.

Before 2015, it was relatively easy for Syrians to enter Lebanon and ask for a residency permit. In January 2015, the Lebanese authorities decided to tighten their control of migratory movements by making visas compulsory for the Syrians (HRW 2016). At the same time, the General Security modified the procedure for obtaining and renewing residency permits, making it more complicated and expensive. Syrians who want a residency permit are now subjected to the *kafala* regime. This means that they have to find a Lebanese citizen who accepts to sponsor them. This system can lead to abuse, for instance if sponsors demand something in compensation. In addition, each applicant has to pay 200 US dollars, which is unaffordable for many Syrians. For those who can afford it, the procedure still remains complicated.

As a result, the majority of Syrians do not have legal documents and are constantly facing threats of arrest and deportation to Syria. Consequently, they are forced to reduce their local travel in order to avoid security checkpoints. They also invent various strategies to cross these barriers without trouble.

The interviewees maintained that young men were more likely to be controlled than young women, and so to be arrested. Although they affirmed that they suffer less from harassment by the Lebanese authorities than young men, young Syrian women are experiencing other kinds of hardships (Amnesty International 2016). As a consequence, the deliberate shift in the official policy has made integration more difficult for young Syrians, and has thus deepened their precariousness.



Economic hardship is a second aspect of precariousness among Syrian youth. Most of the Syrians fled their country leaving behind their economic resources and livelihood. The cost of living is significantly higher in Lebanon than it was in Syria. Housing is the main concern, especially in Beirut. Since 2011, rents have skyrocketed. One interviewee pointed out the importance of material resources to live a proper life in Lebanon: "Those who have a good material situation can manage. If you have money, you are not compelled to do any job you find. You are not compelled to suffer such humiliations. You can deal with this situation."

To deal with these difficulties, Syrian youth have developed various coping strategies. They find help with family and friends, being for instance accommodated for free. The majority of the people we met preferred not to receive aid from international organizations, asserting that others needed it more than them. They expressed criticism against the aid system and considered it insufficient and sometimes hardly accessible for people living in remote areas. With the protracted armed conflict, the assistance provided by families remaining in Syria has decreased. Thus, young Syrians are now supporting their elders, in a reversal of traditional familial solidarity.

The unemployment rate among Lebanese youth is high (Harb 2016), and even higher amongst Syrian youth (ILO 2014). Work in humanitarian organizations presents an attractive opportunity, which we will address below. Before they found such opportunities, the young Syrians we met held a series of precarious jobs. They considered that every job was a way to earn a living and support their relatives. These jobs were often unrelated to what they had studied before. A Syrian woman, who has studied agronomy, narrated her professional life:

In Damascus, I had a good job. I was doing volunteering in a field that I liked too. I had a higher value than here. Here I am working to earn a living, whatever the job is. I have obligations and I am forced to work. I worked in a clothing store. I worked in a patisserie. I worked in an office for two or three months but I could not bear it, because whenever there was a problem, they always said that it was for sure the Syrian girl who was at fault. What am I now? I work for a doctor. Anything I find. And at the same time I volunteer and I study psychology at university.

The young Syrians without higher education and those who had to leave their education due to the war seem less likely to find stable jobs than university graduates. These precarious jobs are part of the widespread informal economy. Without any legal status, Syrian workers are often exposed to exploitation by employers. Such jobs offer wages that are too low to afford the cost of living in Lebanon and do not allow any possibility of empowerment. Reduced material resources, the loss of employment or holding jobs perceived as unfulfilling create a strong sense of downward social mobility.

The young Syrians we met highlighted the opportunity to study as a positive aspect of their migration. However, returning to studies in a new country with a different educational system is difficult. More often than not, equivalence in university degrees is lacking, which can increase the sense of downward social mobility. Studying is not affordable for all the Syrian youth in Lebanon, and they sometimes drop out of university to look for a job. However, some of them have followed professional and academic training offered by international organizations. When they entered university in Lebanon, it was sometimes in fields completely different

from what they had studied back home in Syria. For instance, a Syrian woman we met chose to enrol in psychology after having studied agronomy in Syria. A Syrian man had left Islamic studies for political sciences. The Lebanese University is open to Syrians. It is the only public university in the country and so the most affordable. Being enrolled in university makes it easier to obtain a residency permit.

The economic exclusion is exacerbated by racism based on national belonging. The young Syrians we met insisted on the strength of everyday discrimination they suffer. According to them, it is a combination of State and popular racism:

The way Syrians are treated here, this is what makes me sometimes feel frustrated. You have to behave like this because I am Syrian? As State or society? We suffer from racism from the Lebanese people, not only from the Lebanese State, even if some Lebanese are nice. It is not a matter of confessional belonging; it is because I am Syrian. I have not heard anything but slogans from the Lebanese people. Their statements are good but their behaviour is very bad. I know that the Lebanese State is an ally of the Syrian regime, or at least that there are people within it that are allies of the Syrian regime. But at the level of the people, why is it like this?

The Syrians are the victims of stereotypes, which have been widespread in Lebanon for many years. These stereotypes are based on the image of the Syrian migrant manual worker, who tends to be described as poor, illiterate and dirty. By extension, the majority of Syrians are assimilated to this stereotype:

When I went to university in Lebanon I experienced racism. Some Lebanese friends told me: "Are you really Syrian?" I answered that I was. "No, you cannot be Syrian. The Syrian is always dirty and he works in construction." It was just before the revolution. Maybe now this idea has changed a bit. But racism is very strong among the Lebanese. Of course there are other people who helped us a lot in the associations. But what is prevailing is racism. With the security forces and the army, I cannot tell you, I cannot tell you what we have to endure.

Racism takes the shape of contemptuous remarks and explicitly discriminatory acts. These acts include everyday incivilities as well as more violent behaviours like physical assault. The practices of the security forces contribute to the distrust of the Syrians towards the Lebanese authorities, and deepen the sense of illegitimacy inherent to the exile, as deplored by a young man: "Most of us, the Syrians, when we arrived in Lebanon, we felt a shock. Our presence was unjustified." Illegality and a sense of illegitimacy contribute to the invisibility of the Syrians in Lebanon, thus limiting their social inclusion.

War and exile resulted in the rupture of social ties. Families are split between many countries. All the people we met now have relatives in other Arabic countries, Turkey, Europe, America and Syria. The young Syrians are often alone in Lebanon, without the support of their family. However, some of them also mentioned positive aspects of this separation from the family and the community of origin. The weakening of social control can open a new space of empowerment for young Syrians. They meet people that they probably would not have met in Syria. Thus, they point out the discovery of new cultures and new languages as an opportunity.

All this can lead to changes of practice, concerning for instance clothing, gender relations, religious practices and many others. In spite of these factors of self-fulfilment, the suffering is what prevails in their speech. On the whole they form a very precarious generation.

## **2. SYRIAN HUMANITARIAN ACTORS IN LEBANON**

Lebanese authorities have not been heavily involved in the management of the humanitarian crisis affecting the Syrians on Lebanese territory. Unlike Turkey and Jordan, they refused to set up official refugee camps. We observed a phenomenon of “transfer” from the State to international and local NGOs. Hence, the humanitarian field grew substantially. In addition to pre-existing NGOs, young Syrians have been part of this development, by founding new associations specializing in support to Syrian “refugees”. These associations have been established by Syrians in Syria, in Lebanon or abroad and they foster the employment of Syrian staff. There is frequent cooperation between them for various projects, for example in education or emergency relief. Hence, they constitute, through the shared national belonging of most of their members, the density of their relationships and their shared goals, a “Syrian” subfield in the humanitarian work in Lebanon. The dense social network they form helped facilitate our fieldwork.

The Syrian NGOs work in the cities as well as in more remote areas of Lebanon. Some of them are made up of a few volunteers while others have significantly grown and are employing dozens of workers all over the country. We have observed a change in humanitarian activities since 2011, with an increasing share of activities being labelled as “development”. The humanitarian activists started out with “relief” activities, sometimes at an individual level. They describe their first actions as the result of a duty to respond to the dramatic situation of the poorest Syrians when they arrived in Lebanon. They typically launched campaigns of distribution of food and other staples. They helped the newcomers find shelter. Through fundraising campaigns, they increased their means to implement relief activities.

As a consequence of the protracted war, the exile has lasted and the refugees’ needs have increased. The humanitarian associations expanded towards activities more related to development. This mainly entails a focus on education services to children, and sometimes to adults. Schools were created in the informal camps or close to them, as well as in city neighbourhoods. All the humanitarian activists we met insisted on the priority of education, as the most essential need of refugees. They often used the expression “lost generation” to define the children and teenagers who have been unable to attend school for a long time because of the war. The proportion of teachers among the humanitarian workers is thus very high.

In addition to education services, these associations are offering artistic activities, such as painting, music or theatre. This has provided an opportunity to young Syrian artists to engage in humanitarian action, sometimes with financial compensation. The “empowering” practices led by these NGOs can range from training and financial incentives to self-production. For instance, women are supported to produce arts and crafts they can sell to make a living. In rural settings, some associations are helping refugees to develop agriculture. These examples do not exhaust the various activities led by these organizations, which are generally trying to

broaden their scope.

Among the international and local NGOs, the existence of many faith-based NGOs - Christian and Muslim, and some of them leading in their fields - has to be mentioned. Unfortunately, we did not get the opportunity to study them closely. The associations we studied do not display any sign of confessional belonging. During our fieldwork, we noticed the confessional diversity of their staff. Thus, they distinguish themselves from other organizations working in the same field, which we can describe as faith-based NGOs. It is nonetheless impossible to establish a clear line of demarcation between the NGOs we studied and the faith-based NGOs. The latter have the same general humanitarian aims. However, they differ in their ideological background. The use of the expression "*al-3amal al-khair*", which means "charity work", may be an indication distinguishing faith-based NGOs from others that do not mention the term. In Lebanon, there is an extensive presence of associations close to Sunni political Islam. They receive funding mainly from Gulf States, like Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and they work in collaboration with faith-based NGOs based all over the world.

If these two categories are not strict, it seems nonetheless that their connections are weak. It was quite difficult to obtain information on the faith-based NGOs from the people we met, although they have been working in the same field for many years. Our informants condemned the "politicization" of some associations whose aid may only be allocated conditionally and who implement preaching activities. They also pointed out the risk of clientelism, which is the concern of every actor in the humanitarian field. The political agenda of Sunni NGOs may then be situated between Lebanon, where they work, and Syria where they support stakeholders in the conflict. This is a very sensitive issue in a country where confessionalism is part and parcel of the political field.

Within the field of the "Syrian" non-confessional NGOs, we identified competition, first of all over the same potential donors. They also have intense relationships with both foreign and international organizations. The youth we met were critical about the ability of international organizations to meet the needs of the displaced Syrians. In contrast, they highlighted their own ability to do so, thanks to their proximity with the beneficiaries. They were also critical of international organizations' concentration on relief to the detriment of development, as well as about their lack of cooperation with local NGOs.

Furthermore, there is, as in any economic sector, a certain competition between organizations, international as well as local, over the more qualified workers. Promising high wages and less precarious working conditions, international organizations may attract the more qualified Syrians. The local NGOs lack the means to conform to the international standards and may lose staff members. Activists point out that this phenomenon has been observed in Turkey where the Syrian NGOs are more numerous.

On the other hand, the development and professionalization of some organizations led to changes in their staff. In order to register an association legally, the Lebanese authorities require that there be some Lebanese members among the staff. Beyond this minimal threshold, many young Lebanese have benefitted from the new job opportunities. Statistically, they have higher educational levels than the young Syrians and master one or two foreign languages more frequently. A good command of English and of the jargon of international organizations

eases the search for funding. However, it is first and foremost the administrative and legal barriers imposed on the Syrians that exclude them from formal humanitarian work. Syrians registered with UNHCR are required to sign a pledge not to work. For the unregistered, obtaining a work permit is very complicated. Hence, most Syrians are employed in the informal economy (ILO 2014). A young Syrian illustrates this from his work in a Syrian NGO that has experienced solid growth:

The problem is that, as Syrian, you have no right to work. Even with the NGOs. You need a work permit. The permits cost a lot so the NGOs prefer to employ Lebanese staff. This is the employment law. For teaching, it is not compulsory, above all for foreign languages. I was volunteering, for example for management tasks. But we could not report it officially. Many of those who are working officially are Syrian-Lebanese. They can show their names officially. The others are Syrians or Palestinians. I am talking about ninety percent. All of them are unregistered. And on this basis you can treat them as you wish. A part of the executive was Syrian, but because they could not have a contract they left the country or the NGO. I did not want to travel, but I left the NGO.

As a consequence, it seems that the proportion of young Syrians in these local NGOs has dwindled. Expansion has instead benefitted Lebanese and foreigners, who are generally better off and can bear low wages or volunteering. They are more mobile too and do not face difficulties in going abroad, which is very problematical for young Syrians without legal documents. Despite this general trend, in remote areas of the country, where the security risks are higher and the standards of living different from in Beirut, the presence of Western staff seems lower. Many sectors of the Lebanese labour market have been transformed by the inflow of Syrian refugees. Many Syrians were already working in Lebanon before 2011, mainly in construction and agriculture (Chalcraft 2009). The growth of the humanitarian field is part of the huge economic changes driven by the repercussions of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. A substantial proportion of the activities managed by Syrian refugees and Syrian refugee NGOs was geared towards a response to the humanitarian crisis and not meant as longer-term projects or development programmes. The humanitarian field, which has quickly inflated, could deflate with the reduction of international aid. As a consequence, many of the employment opportunities in this sector may disappear.

### **3. HUMANITARIAN WORK AT THE CROSSROADS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION AND ENGAGEMENT**

Faced with the hardship of living in Lebanon, humanitarian work provides young Syrians an opportunity of employment and engagement in collective action. Far from the stereotype describing refugees as passive victims completely dependent on relief, the humanitarian work illustrates a form of agency. It embraces a large spectrum of specializations and professional commitment. We can first make a distinction between Syrians with salaried jobs and the volunteers.

Activists whom we met are working for associations, more or less legally, with regular financial compensation. Consequently, they can devote themselves to humanitarian work without

seeking additional income. Some of them have benefitted from this opportunity without previous experience in this or a similar field. The larger humanitarian and development organizations even offer Syrians professional career opportunities. Some employees have moved between two or more of the Syrian organizations we looked at. Others hold positions in two different organizations simultaneously.

Heads of organizations often held jobs prior to the crisis that provided them with experience and qualifications which were convertible and highly relevant for a career in the humanitarian field. It is noteworthy that some of them have participated in "civil society" activities sponsored by the Syrian regime within the framework of the Syria Trust for Development programme.<sup>4</sup> For the older individuals in our sample, we have identified a path in which humanitarian work in Lebanon makes up a sequence building on previous engagement of a similar kind. In some ways, the hierarchization of the new NGOs follows "naturally" from people's differences in social capital and experience from "civil society" organizations.

Women, who were active participants in the demonstrations during the uprising less often than men, and even less so in the armed struggle, have largely participated in humanitarian aid inside Syria. The women we met told us how they seldom caught the eye of the security forces, both Lebanese and Syrian, and so were less subject to inspection. Consequently, humanitarian action was a field open to women's participation. It is remarkable that the "Syrian" humanitarian field in Lebanon seems to comprise as many female as male activists. We did not observe blatant gender disparities in favour of men within any of the NGOs we studied. On the contrary, women are very well represented in leading positions, in stark contrast to most economic sectors. Some associations dedicated to women have almost only female staff. Just as for young Syrian men, humanitarian aid is a cherished employment sector for young Syrian women.

Some activists have chosen - at least they justify it as a choice - to be engaged as volunteers. Some asserted that they have declined attractive job opportunities in international organizations. A few associations highlight their specificity as exclusively voluntary. Nevertheless, they accept financial rewards for short-term projects. Volunteerism is open to individuals with employment income:

We are all volunteers in our group. If we receive some money, we give it to the people in the camps or to volunteers working with us. Since I have paid work as an archaeologist, why should I take the money that someone needs more than me? My colleagues are also working in other jobs. We want to remain volunteers.

Volunteering is hard to uphold for those without sufficient income. It usually requires people to dedicate much time to the association. Consequently, some associations struggle to recruit volunteers. Because of this, in addition to migration towards the West, these associations have seen a sharp decrease of their volunteering staff:

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<sup>4</sup> The Syria Trust for Development is an NGO established in 2007 by Asma al-Assad, the wife of the Syrian president. It can be described as a government-oriented NGO with tight links with the regime.

Before, we had more than forty volunteers. They left the country. Now, we have only fifteen volunteers. The living conditions are extremely harsh. You need a job. Before, the volunteers managed to volunteer and to work at the same time. Now, there are fewer job opportunities. Volunteering is difficult.

Overall, the NGOs we studied, even those who lose volunteers, have seen a significant expansion of their activities. Concurrently, they have experienced a process of professionalization, although in a different way for those based on volunteering. Hierarchies are becoming more complex. Administrative tasks and fieldwork tend to be increasingly separated. Such professionalization is fostered by larger NGOs, which provide training for staff of local associations. Entry into the humanitarian field thus provides an opportunity to acquire new technical and relational skills.

Compared with more precarious employment, humanitarian work is described as rewarding. At the crossroads of professionalization and commitment, it seems that the rewards it entails help the young Syrians live in exile in better conditions. It contributes, through salaried work and the social worth of altruistic action, to a prospect for upward social mobility. In this rather cosmopolite milieu, the young Syrians meet people with different cultural backgrounds. Racism is weaker here, also because many fellow workers are Syrians. So it offers them a kind of relative haven. All the young people we met emphasized the contribution of humanitarian work to their self-fulfilment. It is considered as particularly rewarding by young people who have lived through five years of war. They experience the gratitude of the beneficiaries of the aid they are able to provide. They illustrated this with the image of the smiles they see while working in the field. The educational work with women and children is described as particularly rewarding:

When I arrived in Lebanon, I was working with friends in an art gallery. Then I found a job in an NGO in Chatila camp. I started teaching English there and to volunteer. It was a positive experience because it helped me out of the psychological state I was in. I discovered that I was like them. I was helping them and helping myself. In addition, I was used to the camp environment. In Syria, I often went to camps to teach. It is my relationship with children that made me want to continue. At the beginning, it was not for this, but for financial interest. This kind of engagement made me leave my psychological shell. At the beginning, I was only thinking of myself. When I had been there and I had observed the children and how people were working, I discovered that my situation was very good in comparison. They had to be helped; I had to take care of them, not of myself.

It is work on the ground, interaction with the needy, which provides the feeling of recognition. The young workers acquire a feeling of being useful by improving the situation of deprived Syrians. Drawing on their encounters with the deprived, especially in camps in remote areas, the humanitarian workers reassess their own situation and come to the conclusion that, despite all the hardship they are facing, they remain privileged. Humanitarian assistance creates a distinction and distance between the humanitarian workers and the recipients of assistance. The reference in interviews to the words "refugees" and "camps" marks the gap between this environment to which they do not belong, and their own.

The young Syrians we met mostly come from urban and better-off social backgrounds, which is not the situation of people living in the informal camps. Nevertheless, the NGOs attempt to employ Syrians living in the informal camps, as the case of Yahya illustrates. Being hired as a teacher by an association specialized in education, he works with children and young Syrians in a camp located in the Bekaa valley. He is also the leader of his camp. Besides, we must not forget the numerous strategies of mutual aid between the most deprived Syrians, without any NGO intervention.

In the bleak situation that the young Syrians in Lebanon find themselves in, they acknowledge that engagement in humanitarian action is one of the main factors encouraging them to stay in the country and not migrate to the West: "Volunteering brings me very positive energy. Sometimes I feel that I am doing nothing. But when I go to work with them and somebody thanks me and smiles at me, it makes me very happy. This is maybe the only reason that makes me want to continue my life here."

If a majority of the young Syrians we met affirmed that they would travel to the West as soon as possible, a few others consider themselves happy in Lebanon and do not want to migrate further. This is for instance the case for a young Syrian woman who was studying at a university in Italy before the crisis. She was very enthusiastic at the beginning of the uprising but did not return home. Instead she remained in Italy, where she campaigned for the cause of the Syrian uprising. However, she felt guilty for not directly taking part in the protests. In 2013, she attained her PhD and moved to Beirut. After a short visit to Syria and discovering the war's destruction, she started working for a Western NGO in Lebanon, which supports Syrian activists inside Syria. She now feels good in Beirut, despite the difficulties, because she can pursue her engagement and stay in touch with Syria.

The war in Syria continues and the humanitarian needs remain colossal. If some associations work only with refugees, others have established collaboration with humanitarian activists inside Syria, primarily in areas outside regime control. The activists working with people inside Syria were much more reluctant to speak about their activities because of the risk that such information could entail for their partners:

If you really work in humanitarian action, you should not speak about it. Everything that concerns Syria is dangerous. There are young people in Syria that I am supporting, with aid and other matters. I am like a focal point. I am linking different people, young people who work in humanitarian action. The idea is that nobody knows nobody, in order to avoid that, if somebody is arrested, the whole network would be broken up. Here I am working with INGOs or NGOs, donors. It is mostly volunteering, but sometimes with a financial compensation.

Activities with people inside Syria are more politically sensitive than those concerned with Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Inside Syria, all collective action outside the control of the Assad regime is systematically repressed. Since 2011, the regime has not ceased to violently repress humanitarian activists.



#### 4. FROM PROTEST TO HUMANITARIAN AID

The Syrian uprising started with peaceful demonstrations demanding political reforms and regime change. All the young Syrians we met were active during the protest, some more than others. The evolution of the conflict and its consequences have slightly changed their political positions. Humanitarian work marked the beginning of a new form of engagement. The actors provide justifications for this new engagement that are different from those concerning their previous engagement. Yet, like their engagement in the protest, the humanitarian work can be considered a form of civic participation.

To understand the different activist careers, let us first look back at civic participation before the uprising. Many interviewees have previous experience from civic participation at the margins conceded by the regime, as mentioned above. For the most part, they were involved in activities under the patronage of Syrian State authorities, but it still was a way to acquire skills and social networks which were later used to organize the protest and which were useful in the humanitarian field (Ruiz de Elvira 2013). For instance, some volunteered in the Red Crescent or other international and national organizations.

The onset of the uprising marked a decisive turning point for many youth in Syria. The majority of protesters were young people. Broadly speaking, the uprising was an intense moment of political awakening for youth. Just it marked individual turning points, it was also a collective one that we can consider as a generational turning point. Unlike the previous generation, which has often been described as politically inactive, today's Syrian youth did not hesitate to protest publicly against the political regime. As well as a politically committed generation, it is also a generation affected by the hardship of repression, death and exile. With the militarization of the conflict, the forms of non-violent protest changed. The demonstrations dwindled, giving way to media activism, documentation, advocacy and humanitarian aid. These various collective actions have given the activists new skills and social networks, which have been invested in humanitarian activism in Lebanon.

After five years of conflict, the protest positions of the young Syrians have weakened. The weariness they feel in regard to the situation is deepening. Many are those who await the end of the conflict, whatever the result is. Their disappointment concerning the abuses of the rebels is bitter. Therefore, they do not hesitate to compare them with the regime. They see humanitarian action as more noble because it is less subject to the political rifts that have eaten away the Syrian political opposition. This expresses a certain distance from their previous engagement demanding regime change. We noticed that the term "*thawra*", or "revolution", was seldom mentioned during the interviews. However, some activists pointed out the risk related to an exclusive commitment to humanitarian action to the detriment of political action, arguing that the former is mainly palliative whereas the latter is oriented towards the future and social change.

The associations we studied claim their commitment to "neutrality", something they consider a fundamental principle of humanitarian action. According to this assertion, it should be a field impervious to political interference. Yet, in the context of political struggle, the border between humanitarian intervention and politics is porous, as remarked by a young Syrian activist:

When I was in Syria, humanitarian action was connected to revolutionary action. But everyone was following his own interest. To link the revolutionary activism to humanitarian activism, you must first have a revolutionary activism with a precise goal, and then a humanitarian activism that remains outside. The humanitarian activities should not depend on your political orientation. That is why most of the associations here demand those who work within the humanitarian field to respect the neutrality principle.

For this purpose, much effort is made to ensure the activists' compliance with the official line of their organizations. The professionalization of their activities is presented as a token of this neutrality, as is "transparency", especially in dealing with donors. Interviewees admitted that the neutrality is limited or imperfect. The first imperfection is related to the issue of funding. The sponsors offer funding with outcome expectations. As remarked by an activist giving music lessons to Syrian children in a suburb of Beirut: "Art does not require outcome, but funding does." Nevertheless, as mentioned by another activist: "Between the donors' goals and the concrete work on the ground, the leeway is wide."

Several NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières or Médecins du Monde have based their identity on a politics of testimony (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), which implies moving away from the absolute neutrality stance supported by major organizations like the Red Cross. The humanitarian organizations we studied do not have a politics of testimony, which could harm their principle of neutrality. They officially stay away from any political stance and do not name any political responsibility. For instance, the "regime" and the other actors are never explicitly held responsible. Such politics could disturb their relations with donors as well as with different local actors. In a society where confessionality is ruling politics, these associations present themselves as open to every political stance and religious confession. Neutrality is also presented as a way to reach a majority of refugees in need, beyond their political or confession belongings.

However, behind the facade of a neutral civil society, political differences persist. As mentioned above, all the young Syrians we met were opposed to the Syrian regime. Some associations are considered as more politicized, first and foremost the Islamic ones. Many interviewees have condemned the recurrent accusations of treason (*takhwin*) against actors of the "Syrian civil society" in Lebanon. In this climate of suspicion, a young Syrian activist analyses the changes in political stance as a form of deceit in favour of personal interests:

When they arrived here, the Syrians changed their opinions and behaviours. For instance, I know many Syrians who changed their political stance, from pro-regime to opposition. It helps to find a job. But if you speak with them, you know exactly what their true political stance is. You know that he hates the people he helps. The problem is that this one is lying to himself and that the one he helps is doing the same, because he may be pro-regime too. At the same time, there are a lot of people who are opponents [of the Assad regime] who do not reveal it. But you know it quickly when you hear their story.

The humanitarian associations we study have adopted the jargon of the international organizations on "civil society". The activists we met characterized their engagement in

these terms. The official presentations of their activities on the Internet have a similarity with the discourse of the international organizations on the “empowerment” of the aid beneficiaries. As local NGOs, they highlight their action of empowerment with the refugees. The employment of Syrian staff by these associations, both in administration and on the ground, is also considered as empowerment of Syrians living in Lebanon. Humanitarian work may then contribute concurrently to the empowerment of both beneficiaries and humanitarian workers, as this extract of an NGO’s online presentation reveals:

Its employees are frequently also its beneficiaries. [...] Today we employ 110 refugees full time, while 165 women earn money producing textiles and other crafts in our workshop. Our staff represent every sect, geographical region and social class. We want to do much more than get them on their feet; we believe our work is empowering a new generation and paving the way for all of us together to build a new, collaborative Syria for all its citizens when this war ends.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that in their discourse, the term “empowerment” is very often connected with the category of “women”. Women are described, as are children, as more vulnerable in times of war and exile. We found the inspiration for this “empowerment for women” jargon in the international organizations, which value programmes dedicated to women.

If the activities of these associations were first a response to the humanitarian emergency, they are also portrayed as participating in creating a better future for the Syrians during exile and in the event of a return. Educational and empowerment activities may then result in social change. The use of the term “empowerment” denotes an individualistic and harmonious vision of power (Calvès 2009). It contrasts with the protest discourses held previously by the activists opposed to the Syrian regime. It thus seems that they have given up their “revolutionary” agenda and adopted a more reformist one, whose symbol could be the NGO-ization of the activists. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where numerous political organizations transformed into NGOs (Sbeih 2014).

Some Syrian actors and organizations based in Lebanon continue to implement actions contributing indirectly to the protest against the Syrian regime. We can term them advocacy organizations. They organize campaigns to promote their cause, mainly through the use of media and arts. “Mediactivism” has been a distinctive feature within the recent Arab uprisings. It allows young people to act at a distance and relatively anonymously. Some activists are still mobilizing in this way from Lebanon. For instance, a Syrian girl we met works online with a group specialized in the protection of the Syrian activists’ Internet data. They provide assistance, tools and training in cyber-security to the Syrian activists who are threatened by the regime’s intelligence. She wants to migrate to Canada, and asserted that even there she would keep up her work.

Finally, peaceful activists are still mobilizing inside Syria. When they do not feel threatened by the security services, they can enter Lebanon, and return. We met a Syrian girl still living in Damascus. She came to Beirut for a few days to work with a Syrian association specialized in audio-visual arts. An activist from the beginning of the uprising, she has been arrested

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<sup>5</sup> See the Rawabet website: *Bassma W Zaitouna*, <http://www.rawabet.org/users/bassma-w-zaitouna>.

several times by the security forces. Yet, she prefers to stay in Damascus than to live in exile in Lebanon or somewhere else:

Sometimes we feel that our activist friends who left Syria have abandoned us. But many were forced to do so. Personally, even if I was wanted by the security forces, I would not leave. I am saying it now, I do not know what I would do if that happens. I am ready. [Members of] the old opposition stayed more than ten years in jail and they did not leave Syria. Who remains in Syria? Most of them are girls. It is more difficult for men, above all because of the risk of army conscription. For us the girls, even at the checkpoints it is easier, especially since I am not veiled. [...] I do not want to settle here. I do not feel comfortable in Beirut or anywhere else. In Syria it is very difficult. But I stayed in Damascus, in my family's house. I feel more useful in Syria. The main problem is that this is very risky for me. At any time, the security can come and take me. This is very exhausting.

These risks associated with repression are unpredictable, hence the exile of most of the young Syrians. The ways to political participation in Lebanon for the young Syrians are very narrow. Thus we may wonder if humanitarian work does not represent an indirect way to political participation, or at least a transit space perpetuating collective action after the exit from contentious politics. Faced with barriers to political participation, humanitarian work may at least be a haven for activists. This haven displays a facade of de-politicization, and thus appears to exist in the lee of political turmoil. Within it, young Syrians can find a sense of continuity in their civic engagement, as well as a way towards professionalization.

## **5. BLEAK PROSPECTS: FINDING A WAY OUT**

Questioned on their prospects, the young Syrians are not very optimistic. Most of them wish to leave Lebanon as soon as possible to start life anew. The engagement in humanitarian action brings, as we have shown, a certain feeling of self-fulfilment to the young Syrians, in addition to the benefits of salaried work. Nonetheless, this is not sufficient to make them want to remain in Lebanon. Refugees like the others, the humanitarian workers are not sheltered from the hardship of exile in Lebanon. A Syrian girl working with an NGO explained: "Despite all of this, I have the feeling that something is lacking. Despite the fact that I am volunteering, working and studying, I feel that something is lacking. I do not know, maybe because when I was in Syria, the situation was better."

As a result, we have observed individual disengagement when humanitarian workers resign to change their field of activity, to resume studies or for any other personal reason. The most common type of disengagement is migration. Many young Syrians have chosen to leave towards the West. In Lebanon, they live a transitional life without any appealing prospect. Precariousness prevents them from making plans and commitments in the medium term, whether professional or emotional. One such example illustrates very well the obstacles preventing them from imagining a stable future in Lebanon. Working for many years in an NGO, a Syrian man recently married a Syrian-Palestinian girl. They have had a child together but the child cannot be registered by the Lebanese State and remains stateless.

An interviewee used the metaphor of the “trap” to illustrate this feeling of impasse. It is a geographic deadlock: forced to leave their home country, they are now trapped in a country where they are not welcome. They point out that the situation in Lebanon is deteriorating. Social exclusion is increasing. They describe it in psychological terms as “a tiring and depressing situation”. In addition to the everyday suffering, the interviewees evoke their guilt and nostalgia towards the country they left behind. Faced with such circumstances, they see only one solution, to leave.

Since 2015, many young Syrians have left Lebanon for the West (Achilli 2016). The youth, sometimes unaccompanied minors, were the first to depart. They were considered as more capable to bear the hardship of illegal migration and more able to start life anew. An interviewee narrated the story of a friend of his, drawing a very pessimistic conclusion:

My friend died yesterday, drowned. The funny thing is that it did not happen in Turkey, but here in Lebanon. He was swimming and the sea was rough. He has been to Turkey before, but he came back to Lebanon. Then, he received legal papers to travel to Europe. He was about to leave. He was part of this lost generation. It is destiny. We should all leave this country before we die.

They envisage that only migration could offer them the stability they lost in 2011. They see it also as a way to gather separated families, to meet friends or lovers who preceded them. In addition to this, a recurrent argument to migrate is the opportunity to study at reputed universities and to learn another language. Before 2016, two paths were open to Syrian refugees, the legal and the illegal one. Many young Syrians who left Lebanon to Europe went first to Turkey, by sea or air, before they illegally crossed the Aegean Sea. Others left Lebanon through consular services or UNHCR. Since January 2016, Turkey has decreed compulsory visas for Syrians arriving by boat or plane. The Turkish road has thus been restricted, as regretted by a Syrian girl: “I have relatives in Sweden and Austria. We dispersed. I cannot go. The road is closed. If it was open, for sure I would go, even illegally”. Now, only the legal way remains, however with a very complex and random procedure. It is based on a biographical interview with the candidates. The selection criteria appear vague and do not favour young single persons.

For the Syrian refugees, the Lebanese exile is a “nearby” exile, for geographical as well as cultural reasons. The vocabulary used by the Syrians when they speak about migration illustrates this well. To name the departure from Syria, they use the verb “to exit”, whereas for a more distant migration they use “to travel”. For the Syrians living in Eastern Lebanon, only a mountain chain separates them from their homeland. It symbolizes, better than any security checkpoint, the idea of a border, as conveyed by this Syrian man living in the Bekaa valley:

Our hope to go back is strong. We want to go back, for sure. We had the possibility to travel to the West. But we did not want to travel. I want to go back. Here in Lebanon, it is an Arab country, close to us. But we are feeling the distance from our homeland (*ghorba*). Because, do not think that everybody here is nice. We want to go back to our life there.

With worsening hardship in Lebanon, some Syrians are contemplating a return to Syria. A Syrian woman ventured the idea of a return to Syria to work in humanitarian relief closer to those who need the more assistance:

I have been here for four or five years. I went back twice to Syria. I wanted to see my neighbourhood. But when I observed the smoke in the sky I understood that it was impossible. Sometimes I feel that the world is narrowing around me, concerning work, university, psychological fatigue. And I tell my family that it is enough and that I want to go to Syria to work in something related to relief. We have to work inside the areas where the war is unfolding. There are some people going back to Syria to work. Who will help them, the civilians, children, women, men? The idea remains in my head.

The dangers of returning are high, and they are even higher for those who are wanted by the security forces. Crossing the border seems easier for women than men. Whereas many men have crossed the border illegally to find shelter in Lebanon, most of the women did so legally. As we mentioned above, men are likely to be forcibly conscripted into the army. This fear was one of the main reasons for young men to leave Syria. Some people are travelling back and forth for professional or personal reasons. However, for the huge majority of young Syrians, a return to their homeland appears inconceivable for the next several years, until the security conditions improve.

## **CONCLUSION**

The young Syrians in Lebanon are facing ever more obstacles on their way to inclusion in the Lebanese society. They are attempting to find their own collective response to the humanitarian crisis. The engagement in humanitarian work illustrates a kind of agency that overcomes the hardship of exile. As a case study, this is particularly interesting, for it enables us to reflect on the professional and the activist dimensions simultaneously. We may consider this engagement as a continuation of participation in the Syrian uprising. The evolution of the conflict in Syria and the exile in Lebanon have caused the nature of such engagement to change, however. From contentious politics it became at least palliative, at most reformist. However, in a context where the ways to political and civic participation are narrow, the humanitarian field remains a space preserving the inclination to collective action. At an individual level, the prospects are so bleak for young Syrians in Lebanon that even their engagement does not make them want to continue their life there. They faced a brutal crackdown when they protested in Syria and they are now facing so many obstacles that even humanitarian action seems restricted. Many have already left for the West; many more will follow if the Lebanese authorities do not take steps to improve their living conditions.

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*POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.*

**POWER2YOUTH**

**Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)**

Via Angelo Brunetti 9 - I-00186 Roma  
Tel. +39-063224360 | Fax +39-063224363

[www.power2youth.eu](http://www.power2youth.eu)

