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UCL Migration Research Unit

POLICY BRIEF

Religious Minority Experiences of Displacement: Initial Lessons Learnt From Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze Refugees in Jordan

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Overview

Now in its fifth year, the Syrian humanitarian crisis has resulted in the internal and international displacement of over 11 million people (UNHCR 2015). Despite the increasing sectarian nature of the crisis, reports on Syrian refugee identities are largely silent on religion. This is despite the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) commitment to appropriately address and account for religion and religious issues in responding to displacement needs, including protecting and assisting the rights and needs of religious minorities.[2]

Although the relationship between religion and humanitarianism has become an increasing area of interest for researchers and practitioners, the specific role and impact of religious identity in experiences of and responses to displacement is less understood. In order to better understand the importance of religious identity for Syrian refugees, research was undertaken with Syrian Christian and Syrian Druze refugees among the Syrian refugee population in Jordan.

Field research was conducted over a two-month period (July – August 2014 inclusive) in three urban centres across Jordan (Amman, Mafraq, and Irbid). Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were undertaken with 47 Syrian refugees belonging to two religious minority groups (Christian and Druze). Research was also conducted with 32 humanitarian actors responding to the Syrian humanitarian crisis, including Christian and Islamic faith-based organisations (FBOs) as well as UNHCR Headquarter staff in Geneva and field staff in Jordan.

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[1]The research was conducted as part of a graduate research study at the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. It now forms the basis of a doctoral research project at the Department of Geography, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), at University College London.

[2] Such responsibilities are outlined in its Age, Gender and Diversity Policy (UNHCR 2011), its increasing focus on partnering with faith-based organisations in line with the High Commissioner's Faith and Protection Dialogue (UNHCR 2012; 2014), its recent 'Welcoming the Stranger' initiative (UNHCR 2013), and its Urban Refugee Policy stating its commitment to the protection and assistance of religious minorities living in urban centres (UNHCR 2009).

The research had two aims. First, it explored how different actors refer to Syrian refugee identities and how religious identity is referred to (if at all) in such discourse. Second, it examined the ways in which religious minorities experienced displacement and how humanitarian actors respond to refugees' religious identities when providing assistance or protection to Syrian refugees.

This Policy Brief summarises key findings of the research that may be relevant to humanitarian actors offering assistance and protection to Syrian refugees belonging to religious minorities in Jordan. It also proposes a number of ways that humanitarian actors may more actively engage with religious identity in both the language and practices of humanitarianism.

Key Findings

(1) Syrian refugees in Jordan belong to and identify with different religious groups, which directly impacts their experiences of displacement

This research found that Syrian refugee identities are not monolithic. That is, what constitutes a "Syrian refugee" is not a single (religious or non-religious) identity with physical needs or material values. Despite humanitarian ideals of neutrality, religious identity plays a significant role in experiences of and responses to displacement. For religious minorities among the Syrian refugee population in urban centres in Jordan, religious identity was inextricably linked to the ways in which refugees fled their homeland, how they were received in the host country, where they were able to find safety, and their access to (or lack of) humanitarian services and protection.

(2) Religious minorities among the Syrian refugee population experience specific vulnerabilities in urban centres

Due to the large percentage of Syrian religious minorities living outside of camps and in urban centres, religious minorities experience specific vulnerabilities that need to be engaged with explicitly by humanitarian actors in their participatory assessments and subsequently, in their responses to humanitarian assistance and protection. Due to sectarian tensions and fears of reprisal attacks, Syrian Christian and Druze refugees often choose not to register with UNHCR and in order to avoid formal refugee camps, they seek lodging in urban centres, often living in monasteries, clustered housing, or makeshift camps. In such settings, religious minorities experience isolation, stigmatisation, and (perceived or real) discrimination in accessing humanitarian aid and assistance.

(3) Religious identity is often viewed as a source of conflict and identity politics in displacement by humanitarian actors

Many of the humanitarian actors interviewed preferred to avoid engagement with religion in responding to displacement. This was due to two widely held assumptions. First, that religion was

a non-essential feature of displacement and unimportant in relation to the hierarchy of refugee identities, needs, and experiences. Second, that religion is a source of conflict and identity politics. This was particularly pertinent in relation to assumptions held about the role of religion for Syrian refugees.

This latter assumption played a significant role in the ways in which humanitarian actors engaged with religion. Indeed, the view that religion is a source of problems was found, particularly in (perceived or real) discrimination for religious minorities. However, many of the refugees participating in the research also viewed religion as a potentially constructive resource.

(4) Religion can and does play a constructive role for refugee communities

Beyond being a source of resilience and social cohesion, many refugees viewed their religious beliefs, practices, and values as a source for establishing an environment of tolerance and acceptance among differing groups.

Fieldwork interviews revealed that religious division between refugee communities was a result of prejudice born of ignorance of, and exclusion between, different religious groups. This was not only a minority rights concern but a general concern about interactions between religious groups in the host country and Syrian refugees. When two or more believing religious communities encounter each other, tensions can emerge – but the research also found that tensions could also be resolved. However, the specific ways these can be achieved in displacement contexts have yet to be fully explored, largely due to the assumptions that religion is a source of problems, rather than a potential resource for solutions.

Key Recommendations

(1) Identify religious vulnerabilities in participatory assessments and the role of religion in experiences of displacement

Participatory assessments are mapping exercises focused on identifying protection risks among refugee populations (UNHCR 2006). UNHCR guidelines specifically state that the purpose of the participatory assessments is to gather a statistical breakdown of a population and to identify people with special needs. In other words, the purpose of the mapping exercises is to identify risks, to locate where people live, show what services are located near them, and to categorise how many diverse groups of people are among a given refugee population. These assessments are not an examination of the ways in which refugee communities draw on religion in various forms in displacement. In light of the findings of this research, it is timely and urgent that participatory assessments explicitly identify and examine the role of religion in refugee experiences.

Further, a change in the administrative structures of UNHCR registration for newly arrived refugees from conflict zones that are fought across religious and sectarian lines may be required. UNHCR

staff and other humanitarian actors should be trained in the sensitivities of religious identity for religious minority groups in such settings, encouraging deeper understanding of the multiplicity of issues, identities, and needs that refugees may have in different contexts.

(2) Increase mutual communication and collaboration between religious groups

Giving space for religion's positive influences to contribute to experiences of displacement for religious groups is one step forward to resolutions between religious groups in refugee communities. Specifically, within the urban setting, the potential for religion to contribute to improved relations between refugees and their host communities and the role of inter-religious activities in displacement contexts has yet to be fully and actively explored.

In order to increase mutual comprehension and expand the breadth and rigour of inter-religious activities and collaborations in humanitarianism, humanitarian actors would do well to *not only* engage further with FBOs and religious leaders but also directly with refugee and host communities that also identify themselves in religious terms.

(3) Take into account non-instrumental values of religion

Exploring the various (spiritual, human, social, economic) resources that promote resilience (see El Nakib and Ager 2015) for refugees is important. However, they should go beyond the purely instrumental role of FBOs and towards also identifying the various ways that refugee values and beliefs themselves support and assist refugees. The ability to articulate and foster a range of positive values that religion can offer in humanitarianism, specifically by refugee communities themselves, has not been fully understood. This also means its potential contributions have remained untapped.

Engaging in and creating spaces for the exchange of religious concepts, values, and principles is an important way of contributing to positive engagements with religious pluralism. These spaces may give refugees with religious affiliations the ability to express and act on their religious motivations and values to assist other refugees or indeed, to help advance the actions and programmes of other humanitarian actors. There is much room to more fully explore religion's role in other areas of humanitarianism and particularly in displacement. Further research has the potential to contribute significant insights into avenues for connecting religious values and motivations to humanitarian aims.

(4) Locate a plurality of voices and positions within a tradition

In order to engage with refugee communities across different religious affiliations and identities, it is critical to identify and employ a range of voices and positions within each tradition. This wider and deeper engagement is necessary to not only better understand different traditions but also to identify *who* can speak for them within that tradition. Failing to recognise the plurality of voices and positions within a tradition can have detrimental effects and thus, the need to be reflexive of the power dynamics and issues of representations in these spaces is critical.

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In other words, it should not be mistaken that all adherents of a religion agree in theory or practice on various aspects of a religion. Identifying 'correct' interpretations of a tradition is difficult but it is necessary to engage with all its complexities. For instance, the ways in which a Syrian Assyrian Christian woman interprets Christian ethics and beliefs can significantly differ from the interpretations of a Jordanian Christian man, and so on.

The complexities of locating voice and religious authority is an important challenge and needs to be explored deeply and taken seriously in future engagement on these themes. Consulting a variety of scholars may also help identify voice and authority, which can include building stronger connections across an interdisciplinary network of scholars engaged in the study of religion in development and humanitarianism. The major point here is that in accepting that religion can be manifested in multiple ways and influenced, expressed, and acted upon by a range of actors is not to simplify the phenomenon but to raise and express its complexities in order to face them. In recognising that dialogue and engagement with a wider set of religious scholars and actors is necessary is to assist in clarifying some of this complexity.

(5) Rethink language to reshape practice

There is a need to build on recent efforts to bring religion more explicitly into the language and practice of humanitarianism by UNHCR and to rethink the existing language used in UNHCR documents employed to inform UNHCR staff and other humanitarian actors on religious issues. To illustrate where rethinking language can be incorporated in existing pieces, it can be seen that UNHCR's (2014) Faith Partnership Note in its present format does not refer to refugee communities in religiously pluralist terms and does not associate religious values (for instance, solidarity, compassion, and charity) to them. Identifying and selecting the right language to describe religion – religious groups, individuals, as well as organisations such as FBOs – is a complex but necessary challenge to face.

Establishing a shared language and set of values that moves beyond instrumental notions requires sensitivity but also a certain degree of comfort with ambiguity as the initial investigation is undertaken. For instance, with the rise in interest in FBOs as development actors, the term 'faith actors' or the 'faith sector' has been frequently employed; however, the use of the term 'faith' instead of 'religion' poses problems. For instance, the term 'faith' can be seen to refer predominately to Christian affiliation and thus denoting a certain "Christianisation" of other religious groups (Bretherton 2010). While it is then appropriate for humanitarian actors to reflect a diverse range of priorities, viewpoints, and motivations by using the designation of 'religion', the term still needs to be clarified in order for it to be better understood and accepted by all actors.

Similarly, the statement issued by UNHCR (2013) entitled 'Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders', could be incorporated into other UNHCR policies and approaches – not only in religion-only matters and for religious leaders. Currently, the declaration outlines the commitment of UNHCR and FBOs to uphold a number of principles, including providing welcoming environments for displaced people through promoting community understanding and tolerance and

combatting xenophobia. However, while the concepts of hospitality and tolerance are mentioned in both the Faith Partnership Note and the Welcoming the Stranger statement, they are not extended as principles and approaches applicable to *all* humanitarian actors, but only to religious actors.

Given the limited contexts and experiences of engaging with religion in humanitarianism, it can be seen how language reflects these limitations. Therefore, there is a need for UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to become more familiar with the religious needs and values of refugees across a range of affiliations, behaviours, values, and motivations. Doing so may help to more accurately reveal religiously inspired narratives of humanitarianism that also reflect nuances and complexities in the field. These overarching narratives can then be adapted according to local realities across a range of contexts, rather than to make general statements related to religion in purely instrumental terms.

Indeed, there is no single manifestation of religion in practice and there are no simple responses to the complexities of the phenomenon. However, greater literacy in religion as a force in humanitarianism is a crucial step towards more informed engagement of religion's multiple roles and potentialities in the field. Stronger attempts at capacity building, which are then reflected in refined narratives on religion in humanitarianism, can be rolled out through religiously-sensitive initiatives, ensuring that future engagement with diverse religious groups in displacement are appropriate and effective.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of UCL's Migration Research Unit.