

The Other Side of the Border

Solidarity and the Syrian Displacement in Lebanon

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In the wake of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Syrian dissidents in Lebanon cultivated their revolutionary commitment with the support of Lebanese communities. This political solidarity morphed into humanitarian care toward wounded and displaced Syrians in response to the emergency created by the war. With the mutations of the war in Syria and the collapse of the revolution as a political project, these solidarities were reconfigured to tackle the everyday hardship of displacement. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon (2014–2019), the article retraces the manifold incarnations of revolutionary solidarity in Lebanon and their relation to the other side of the border. By moving away from hospitality, the article rethinks the Syrian displacement in Lebanon through the concept of solidarity and its spatial and temporal intricacies.

■ **KEYWORDS:** border, displacement, revolution, solidarity, Syria, vernacular humanitarianism, war

In August 2018, Abu Mahmoud¹ decided to celebrate the *‘eid* at the beach with his family and three volunteers. I was surprised by this initiative, the first of its kind since my arrival in Northern Lebanon for my first fieldwork in 2014 and 2015. My everyday life with Abu Mahmoud’s community up until then was confined mainly to the perimeters of the camp and the school the community built, working relentlessly on the school initiatives and supporting other displaced Syrians. Our confinement was also dictated by Lebanese Army checkpoints dotting the main roads connecting cities and towns, as well as the main arteries of the city of Tripoli, making mobility a dangerous endeavor for the majority of Syrians, whose status there was illegal.

The day at the beach was very far from those tense memories. However, our nocturnal wandering in a car around Tripoli resurfaced other memories tied to the city. Abu Mahmoud drove up a hill and while we were admiring the view of Tripoli and the sea, his gaze wandered elsewhere. “During the revolution, this square was full of activists working on medical assistance,” he whispered. His voice was solemn and excited as he fed us more details about Syrian and Lebanese mobilization in support of the revolution he joined at the end of 2011, after being forced to flee Syria. His recollection resonated with other accounts I listened to about Tripoli and its inclusion in the cartography of the Syrian revolution—it was a distant past I never directly witnessed, one very far from the Tripoli I first encountered—but still present in the memories of Abu Mahmoud and his former fellow activists.

The mutations of Tripoli reflected the ties between Syria and Lebanon and were made possible by the porousness of the border. Both the Syrian revolution and the war radically transformed Tripoli between 2011 and 2015. It was a re-inscription of these events into the urban



texture of the city and a process that displaced not only people but the political across the Syrian–Lebanese border.

Displacement is usually understood through the concept of hospitality (Alkan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023; Carpi 2014, 2016; Dağtaş 2017; El Dardiry 2017; Rozakou 2012; Thorleifsson 2016). Through this framework, the host–guest relation is defined as being temporary and based on a relation of (unfulfilled) reciprocity. What would happen, though, if displacement transcended a relation of hospitality and became rooted in a relation of solidarity? This article rethinks Syrian displacement (*nuzuuh*) in Lebanon through different incarnations of Syrians’ solidarity, tracing its origin to Syrian activists’ political commitment to the Syrian revolution (*thawra*). For these Syrians this started with an initial peaceful uprising that demanded the fall of the regime in March 2011. Then for some, the revolution morphed into a military insurgency in response to the regime’s repression of the civil movement. As the years went on, the escalation of violence further mutated into a proxy war with Islamic groups and other international actors entering the conflict and provoking a crisis of displacement within Syria and outside its borders (Chatty 2021).

The revolution and repression in Syria, the war and the humanitarian emergency in Syria and Lebanon, and the precariousness of Syrians’ displacement in Lebanon have all turned relations of social and political solidarity into a mobilizing force to deal with the cross-border crisis. By questioning the “national-order-of-things” (Malkki 1995) through solidarity practices, I dissect the nature of displacement. Made visible are forms of political contestation that emerged inside Syria and continued shaping how Syrians inhabited their displacement in Lebanon. This re-centering also reflects how being dis-placed, namely being located on the other side of the border, directly shaped an understanding of the actions taken, the goals of the revolution and the kinds of transformation this solidarity underwent.

I trace the trajectory of the displacement of Syrian activists between roughly 2011 and 2015 and follow the development of different forms of solidarity within Syria and their dislocation and reconfiguration on the Lebanese side of the border. By looking at these transformations of solidarity over time and throughout place, multiple fronts of solidarity in action emerged reshaping the horizons of belonging and the political significance of these practices. Specifically, contingent and elastic forms of solidarity are born in times of political crisis inside Syria and are reconfigured by the crisis of war and displacement between Syria and Lebanon. By doing so, the article does not provide an account of a Syrian “romance of solidarity” (Papataxiarchis 2016: 209). Indeed, social and political fractures coexisted alongside instances of solidarity and, even within solidarity, the social obligation of giving is not devoid of power relations (Mauss and Guyer 2016). On the contrary, it sheds light on how displacement can also foster horizontal types of social relations and modes of action. Although these might appear at the margin of social processes characterizing instances of hospitality and humanitarian interventions, I argue that Syrian solidarity practices in Lebanon are crucial. Indeed, the social obligation of giving shapes and gives meaning to displacement through a constant renegotiation and expansion of the horizons of belonging.

My research is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon, starting with my PhD research (2014–2017) and continuing afterward (2018–2019). The main fieldwork took place between August 2014 and September 2015. During this time, I lived part of the week in a camp built by a community from rural Homs and worked in the school as a teacher and activist. Fieldwork was also conducted in Beirut and Tripoli where I engaged with and followed several Syrian activists, former activists, and displaced Syrians disengaged from any political activity. The project combines participant observation and oral history interviews with Syrians’ memoirs, social media posts, and legal documents. This is in addition to interviews with Syrian and

Lebanese intellectuals, activists, lawyers, representatives of NGOs, UN agencies, and Lebanese state authorities. Fieldwork was mainly conducted in Arabic unless my interlocutors preferred to use English.

Another Displacement: Revolutionary Solidarity on the Other Side

Anthropological studies on displacement employ the concept of hospitality to capture the unfolding of social relationships between guest communities and their hosts, be they the state, local communities or humanitarian actors. Scholarly works focus on the relations of power inhabiting the host–guest paradigm capturing how the ethical imperative of hospitality produces new alterities and political subjectivities (Rozakou 2012). This paradigm requires a delicate balance between reciprocity and temporariness that can rarely be sustained, as displacement usually transmutes from humanitarian emergency (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010) to long-term protracted displacement (Feldman 2012; Gabiam 2016).

In the Syrian case, the ambivalent nature of hospitality in its different layers is tied to the actors involved in such generous acts. Hospitality offered by the state, as in the case of Turkey assigning the status of *misafirs* (guests) to Syrians, can disrupt historical relations developed between minority groups in Turkey and Syrians (Dağtaş 2017). A similar disruption characterized the marginal regions of Lebanon where the introduction of a discourse of humanitarian hospitality reframed Syrians as guests. This discourse disarrayed historical relations between Syrians and Lebanese based on notions of ambivalent nationhood and transform Syrians into a new Other (Carpi 2016).²

The complexities arising from the dynamics of hospitality and their metamorphoses cannot be determined a priori. They are molded by socio-economic conditions that might not be emergent from political processes at the origin of displacement, such as war (El Dardiry 2017; Thorleifsson 2016). Hospitality does not inevitably turn into hostility (Derrida 2000). On the contrary, it could also be the basis of a relationship of reciprocity nurtured throughout time and centered on the exchange of gifts (Alkan 2021).

The concept of hospitality helps us to think about the fluidity of the social processes that characterize displacement, while highlighting the deep imbalance in power relations between guests and the different actors performing the role of hosts. This imbalance is the result of the different scales and language registers employed by hosts and guests that constantly redefine “hospitable assemblages” (Al-Khalili 2023) and the limits of such configurations. However, hospitality also categorizes these relations vis-à-vis the nation-state’s boundaries. The assumption is that an imbalance of power comes from how crossing the border and being displaced is determinative of a relationship of reciprocity based on hospitality. Although this is the case for many Syrians who crossed the border to find refuge in Lebanon, their displacement also prefigures other types of social relations based on solidarity.

The formation of Syrian solidarity networks in Lebanon was made possible by Lebanon’s open border policy and the historical porousness of the Syrian–Lebanese border. The social, political, economic and cultural continuities characterizing the two countries (Carpi 2016; Obeid 2010, 2019; Picard 2006) facilitated the creation of a revolutionary front in Lebanon in the first years of the Syrian revolution as well as the emergence of Syrian networks of solidarity. Remarkably, the existence of these collectivities, their work and even transformations were based on (and in response to) the events occurring on ‘the other side of the border’.

Revolutionary solidarity develops in reaction to Syrian state power and violence, thus becoming a way to run counter different forms of oppression, such as the repression and warfare

enacted by the Syrian regime inside Syria and its consequences, for example, massive displacement. In this case, Syrian solidarity was directed toward Syrian revolutionaries, civilians, victims of the war and—sometimes—wounded fighters both in Syria and Lebanon. The relational dependency between Syrian solidarity networks in Lebanon and the events inside Syria is not the only incarnation of ‘the other side of the border’. The unfolding of the crisis of displacement in Lebanon and the risks of a spillover of the Syrian conflict in the country—which became more tangible with the Islamic State’s sack of Aarsal in 2014—redefined the ‘other side of the border’ as it stretched within Lebanon too.

Lebanon’s crackdown on Syrian revolutionary networks, and the rise of social boundaries between Syrians and Lebanese in 2014, reconfigured solidarity as activists started to fear not only arrest in Lebanon but also *tarhyl* (forced deportation) to Syria. Thus, in the context of the crisis of displacement, solidarity is activated, reconfigured and collapses in response to the pressure exerted by different political fronts, including the Lebanese and Syrian states and the different social and political realities in which it is situated. Disentangling the intricacies that produced these disparate acts of solidarity located in Lebanon shows they are originated and nurtured by the political and military events and forms of socialities characterizing ‘the other side of the border’.

The rootedness of Syrian solidarity in Lebanon on ‘the other side’ produces a relation of reciprocity that does not rely on asymmetrical relations of power based on temporariness as in the case of hospitality. By treating solidarity as the enactment and performance of a form of belonging, I show how this belonging is based on a shared social and political predicament produced by the revolution and the war in Syria and redefined in the context of everyday displacement in Lebanon. Yet, the production of these revolutionary collectivities is also formed within traditional forms of sociality. According to Emile Durkheim, solidarity is the glue that keeps society together (Durkheim 1933). While solidarity is a historical and contemporary concept riddled with ambivalences and contradictions (Cingolani 2015; Dağtaş and Can 2022; de Koning and de Jong 2017), it traditionally hinges on shared values, beliefs and identifications as well as everyday contacts and immediate social networks (Gofman, 2014 in de Koning and de Jong 2017: 16).

In the Syrian case, solidarity relies on forms of sociality nurtured through “everyday moral, affective and material exchanges” (Obeid 2019: 20). As in the case of the Lebanese bordertown of Aarsal studied by Michelle Obeid, sociality in Syria is based on *‘ishra*, namely the sharing of life through daily interactions and mundane forms of reciprocity (Obeid 2019: 20–21; see also Abu-Lughod 1986: 63). While *‘ishra* implies the sharing of everyday life, its principle of mutual engagement and reciprocity is also employed with extended family and in other forms of social relationship such as friendship³ (Obeid 2019). With the rise of the Syrian revolution, the configuration of social relations among revolutionaries were rooted in this configuration in which mutual engagement and reciprocity were central. In the heyday of the revolution, some of these social relationships have moved the “zone of social gravity” from the sect, family and even neoliberal authoritarianism to friendship (Brønd 2017). However, in other cases, revolutionary collectivities arose within the same family (or part of it), neighborhood or town. The birth of these collectivities and their dislocation in Lebanon became a crucial form of support for many Syrians inside the country but also those displaced in the wake of the war.

Yet, the significance of these collectivities was not only social but also political as it was embedded in the revolutionary struggle and its radical new horizons of possibility (Haugbolle and Bandak 2017) in antithesis to the al-Assad regime and its rule of violence (Ismail 2018). As Papataxiarchis notes in the context of Greece under austerity, contexts of crisis reshape the concept of solidarity and its translation into practice (Papataxiarchis 2016). During the economic crisis in Greece, solidarity was a discourse and a practice that emerged in response to austerity

measures and gave rise to new horizontal and anti-hierarchical collectivities, modes of action and even an understanding of the self (Cabot 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016; Rakopoulos 2016; Rozakou 2016). In the Syrian revolution, conversely, the articulation of solidarity (*tadamoun*) did not occur as a discourse but exclusively as a practice. Syrians employed the word *nashataat* (initiatives, activities) to indicate the disparate enactments of solidarity throughout the different phases of the crisis.

The absence of a discourse on solidarity was based on the inclusion of these practices into the revolutionary project and its political imagination (Haugbolle and Bandak 2017) and its rethinking of citizenship and belonging. Solidarity in this Syrian revolutionary iteration enabled a high degree of elasticity in terms of the types of practices and the people included in these circuits of giving between Syria and Lebanon. Indeed, in Lebanon these practices morph throughout time outliving the collapse of the revolutionary project and the sealing of the border. These radical transformations entailed a different understanding of the “gift” (Mauss and Guyer 2016) offered by activists to other Syrians throughout the different phases of the crisis. At the beginning of the revolution and the outbreak of the war, activists’ social obligations of giving were rooted in the sharing of the revolutionary cause, namely being an enemy of the Syrian regime. This political positionality motivated the relational empathy based on kinship models (Bornstein 2012) through which Syrians performed solidarity.

As the war in Syrian worsened so did the crisis of displacement in Lebanon, the Syrian version of vernacular humanitarianism (Brković 2016, 2020) implied that the social obligation to give based on relational empathy was expanded to Syrians in need. Syrian solidarity was still rooted in the sharing of a social and political predicament, what changed was the predicament they shared itself; it was not anymore being part of the revolutionary struggle but having lived through the war and inhabiting displacement.

Protests, Exiles and Oppression: The Syrian Revolution in Lebanon

In March 2011, a group of children in Daraa painted graffiti on their school wall calling for the fall of the regime; it was the famous slogan of the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. The subsequent arrest and torture of these children sparked spontaneous protests in the city that soon reverberated throughout other regions of Syria. Shortly after, people also demonstrated in Lebanon, as Aliya revealed to me. Aliya is a Syrian single woman in her early twenties originally from Damascus’ old city. She holds Lebanese citizenship and joined the protests against the al-Assad regime in March 2011. As the uprising continued, her political commitment grew accordingly attending protests and becoming involved in the Local Coordination Committee (LCC, *al-tansiqiyya al-mahaliyya*). This involvement was the reason of her arrest by the *al-amn* (Syrian security services, also known as *mukhaabaraat*). Few months after her release from prison, Aliya was sentenced to exile (*ib'aad*) to Lebanon; a decision somewhat *ghariyb* (strange) since, she said to me, fellow activists could still live a normal life (*hayat 'aadiya*) in Damascus. At the beginning of 2012, the Syrian Security Services abandoned her in the highlands of the Bekaa Valley where, she soon discovered that Lebanese communities supported the Syrian uprising by organizing many initiatives, including demonstrations.

Lebanese involvement in the Syrian revolution and the formation of Syrian–Lebanese solidarity was based on the Lebanese experience of oppression at the hand of the Syrian regime, reinforced by social and kinship ties that historically cut across the border. This experience of oppression resides in the decades-long Syrian military occupation of the country that started during the Lebanese Civil War. Officially endorsed by the Ta’if Agreement and formally ended

in 2005 (Carpi 2014; Chalcraft 2009; Obeid 2010, 2019), the Syrian military presence ensured that post-war Lebanon's politics and economy were under the tight control of the Syrian regime (Ismail 2018; Picard 2006, 2016). In marginal areas of Lebanon such as the Bekaa Valley and Akkar, this control and presence were not as discreet as in Beirut or other areas of Lebanon. As Michelle Obeid observes, the Syrian military presence in Aarsal had "a high degree of control and intervention in local affairs" (Obeid 2019: 14).

Lebanese antagonism vis-à-vis the regime and the solidarity toward the Syrian uprising was also contingent on the political and sectarian geography of Lebanon. Tripoli, Akkar, and northern Beqaa were the initial incubators in the formation of intra-Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese networks of solidarity both within Lebanon and between Lebanon and Syria. These processes differed from other regions like southern Lebanon and Hermel, a region situated in the Bekaa Valley. Mobilization did not occur in these areas as they were, generally speaking, Hezbollah's stronghold and, thus, aligned with the regime.

Strong support and solidarity for the Syrian uprising were also publicly absent in Beirut. In the Lebanese capital, there was an atmosphere of suspicion and fear among revolutionary Syrians and Lebanese due to the presence of Syrian regime allies, such as Hezbollah and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). The alleged presence of the Syrian *mukhaabaraat* also inhibited any substantial political mobilization. At the beginning of the uprising, there were demonstrations led by leftist Lebanese activists in front of the Syrian embassy located in a central neighborhood of Beirut. They abruptly ended after participants were attacked by members of the SSNP and Syrian Ba'th Party (Musallam 2020: 33). In recounting this suppressed mobilization, a Lebanese woman in her mid-thirties involved in Syrian intellectual circles in Beirut described to me that many of her Syrian friends had been living in fear in the capital, feeling—and effectively being—under surveillance. Her same friends actually felt more freedom to discuss political issues in Damascus where the wall of fear broke down, and acted in Beirut as if they were still in (al-Assad's) Syria.⁴ While some Syrians, including migrant workers (Proudfoot 2022), continued their revolutionary activism underground in Beirut, others split their life between the capital, where they lived and worked, and Tripoli, where they cultivated their revolutionary commitment. By the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, Tripoli became the epicenter of the Syrian revolution in Lebanon.

Kani, a Kurdish Syrian in his late twenties, is a revolutionary activist who graduated from Damascus University shortly before the uprising began.⁵ In early 2012, Kani was involved in the Friday protests and the revolutionary movement but decided to leave his hometown after the disappearance of one of his close activist friends at the hands of the security forces. He fled to Lebanon, explaining to me that, "I had a former friend and also I can do something, I can make out a life and participate in some activities in Lebanon." While living and working in Beirut, Kani used to commute weekly to Tripoli where he continued his revolutionary activism by joining the Union of Free Syrian Students. With this grassroots initiative, Kani and another activist friend organized Friday demonstrations in the city in support of the revolution. Tripoli is also where Aliya moved in 2013 and where Abu Mahmoud conducted his revolutionary work, as described in the vignette at the beginning of the article. Aliya described the Tripoli she encountered in 2013:

In Tripoli, [. . .] there were a lot of initiatives (*nashataat*). In Tripoli, there was freedom of speech, freedom to organize a demonstration, there was freedom for everything [regarding the revolution]. The problems in Lebanon were not many [at that time]. [. . .] In Tripoli there was a lot of collaboration between Syrians and the people of Tripoli (*ahl Taraablus*). Many people in Tripoli have Syrian origins, maybe the mother is Syrian and the father Lebanese or the opposite.

In Tripoli, as described by Aliya, the revolution added new meanings to pre-existing social and kinship ties existing between Syrians and Lebanese (see also Carpi 2014; Obeid 2019; Picard 2006). These relations and the recognition of inter-dependency between Lebanon and the events in Syria were the base upon which revolutionary ethos, modes of political action and solidarity practices developed.

While forms of solidarity were heterogenous, demonstrations represented an important site of the expansion of revolutionary friendships and solidarity networks. As a place with “a lot of freedom,” Aliya suggests that Tripoli fostered a way to imagine and experience other modalities of social and political being (Mittermaier 2014; Sabea 2013). This freedom allowed Aliya—as well as others who described to me that particular “time out of time” (Sabea 2013)—to fully perform their revolutionary activism and concretely devote themselves to this political cause.

These processes at the heart of the Syrian–Lebanese momentum toward shared revolutionary struggle remapped (part of) Lebanon in the Syrian revolutionary cartography. This remapping had different meanings for Syrians and Lebanese. For Syrians, the demonstrations, especially in Tripoli, continued to be a medium with which to redefine Syria as a nation detached from al-Assad Syria—similar to the role these protests performed inside the country (Ismail 2011). In her analysis of the revolutionary movement in 2011, Salwa Ismail argues that demonstrations and Syrian networks of solidarity were “an exercise of political-community-making that entails a re-imagination of the nation, in practices and discourse, in terms that counter and undo the regime’s practices of government and rule” (Ismail 2011: 547).

The participation of Lebanese communities in these protests and other types of *nashaataat* (activities) adds another layer of complexity. While these forms of solidarity reinscribe Tripoli and other Lebanese regions into the cartography of the revolution, they are also a claim regarding Lebanon. Protests formed a political collectivity claiming its own existence in the Lebanese public space without contesting the border and the configuration of the nation-state; it was rather a claim against the influence of the Syrian regime in the political life in Lebanon.

This shared temporal horizon at the center of contemporary mobilization was based on a political imagination of an alternative, better future, one which this community and its sense of solidarity could create and forge. Schielke notices in the Egyptian revolution that, “revolutionary struggle creates an autonomy of more relational and collective—also more combatant and antagonistic—kind, established and measured in confrontation with its enemies. It is a struggle that is centered on the ability to desire something different as an aim in its own self right” (Schielke 2015: 209). In the Syrian case, the formation of such relational and combatant autonomy built on experiences of the past and hopes for the future. This fueled a liminal sense of togetherness between Syrians and Lebanese that deepened other instances of solidarity developed in response to the escalation of violence inside Syria and the crisis of displacement.

Solidarity as Humanitarianism in Times of War

Throughout 2011 and 2012, demonstrations continued in both countries. In Lebanon, these protests were an important part of the life for many Syrian exiled revolutionaries and became instrumental in the development of cross-border solidarity networks among Syrians and Lebanese in the wake of the escalation of violence. Indeed, the increasingly ruthless repression by the hand of the regime of the peaceful protesters—as in the case of Aisha and Kani’s friend—provoked a military insurgency led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). By mid-2011, revolutionaries responded to these military developments by incorporating aid, relief, and medical assistance in their activism. Revolutionary commitment started to unfold in heterogeneous modes of action

and solidarity practices, which subsequently became the most prominent feature of Syrian revolutionary activism in Lebanon and its embeddedness in the struggle against the regime.

In Homs and some of its rural hinterlands, the FSA started to operate alongside the peaceful movement by August 2011 protecting civilians and demonstrators against the regime's repression and attacks (Ferreri 2018; Üngör 2020). In 2012 the city became a theatre of the conflict and activists started to concentrate their efforts on providing humanitarian assistance to their fellow protesters and local populations caught in the midst of the war.

The experience of Barak, an activist and war photographer in his early thirties from Damascus, is paradigmatic in this regard.⁶ Similarly to Aisha, Barak was arrested and tortured for participating in demonstrations in the springtime of 2011. After his release, he continued his work for the revolution. His revolutionary activism became increasingly centered on helping wounded protesters and civilians in Homs whose access to medical assistance was barred since governmental hospitals were included in the machinery of state repression. Thanks to his Alawi identity and accent, Barak easily crossed security and military checkpoints dotting the main highway between Damascus and Homs carrying first aid kits including blood bags, needles, and other medical items.

With parts of Homs under siege, Barak and his friend activists widened their action by preparing and distributing food basket to families in need and coordinating the collection of donations for the families of the martyrs. This engagement allowed him to connect to activists living in the city but also, Idlib, Hama, and Lebanon, since this medical and humanitarian assistance, including cash donations, were financed by the members of these collectivities themselves. These donations and the distribution of food and other items can be interpreted as a form of vernacular humanitarianism, although Barak and others interpreted them as revolutionary work.

Indeed, Barak admitted to me, "It was f—g dangerous, I know that, but at that time I didn't feel [it was] so dangerous really. I felt I was, like, this is my own part of helping. I didn't belong, until now I don't belong to any party, to any political party, I don't even like political parties at all." This risk became real and tangible in the spring of 2012 when the security services started to look for him as a video circulated online captured his participation at the funeral of a renowned activist killed in Homs. By the end of 2012, Barak fled to Lebanon where he continued his humanitarian activism by collecting material donations and funds offered by Syrians and Lebanese alike, distributing them to displaced families in the Bekaa Valley.

Čarna Brković defines vernacular humanitarianism as "aid provided by various local actors in tune with their socio-historically specific ideas of humanness, as a response to an emerging need that cannot be adequately addressed through conventional channels of help, but in a different form of the international humanitarian organizations" (2020: 224). Barak's activism in the humanitarian field is not distant from this definition, as his work was based on specific forms of socialities, knowledge, and possibilities rooted in the Syrian context.⁷ Yet, the wider context that made such humanitarian endeavor possible was also the origin of the risks it entailed, for example, being arrested and imprisoned at the hand of the regime's military and security apparatuses.

For the regime, Barak's impulse to help was distant from the neutrality and moral sentiments embedded in humanitarianism (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2011) and their vernacular manifestations (Bornstein 2012; Brković 2016, 2020, 2023; Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023; Fengjiang 2023; Grill 2023). On the contrary, he read his own humanitarian labor as a politically charged activity as it was a form of material solidarity offered to Syrians not as beneficiaries but as a sense of obligation based on a shared predicament (see also Fengjiang 2023). This labor, as much as his attendance at the protests, was engrained in the revolution, which, consequently, transformed him into an enemy of the state.

The flight of revolutionaries to Lebanon during the first year of the uprising became pivotal for the creation of the infrastructures of revolutionary solidarity that mimicked the dynamics at work inside Syria. Albeit, such activism entailed fewer dangers in Lebanon. While relief and medical assistance, together with food distributions, were central in the work of many Syrian (and Lebanese) activists in Lebanon and across the border, this humanitarian endeavor was also combined with other activities, such as media coverage of the war and loose ties with the FSA.

For instance, Kani, as a member of the Union of Free Syrian Students, connected LCCs inside Syria with the international community and foreign journalists with FSA rebels in Tripoli or near the border. Kani's media work such as reporting, photographing, and working as a fixer, was incorporated into revolutionary activism. The interpretative frame of the events inside Syria was an issue that concerned many activists who were already involved inside the country as citizen journalists covering peaceful protests and the outbreak of the conflict. Their "affective proximity" (Al-Ghazzi 2023) to the events they covered entailed not only a civic duty to speak out about what was happening inside Syria but also an emotional labor that was in antithesis with the neutrality and distance characterizing professional journalism (Al-Ghazzi 2023).

For Kani, this type of labor was also a form of solidarity vis-à-vis activists still inside Syria and had the aim of expanding outwards toward the international community and its selective solidarity (al-Haj Saleh 2018). This expansion of solidarity also implied a certain recognition of the FSA factions. Although at the time of my fieldwork, Syrian activists distanced themselves from the military struggle and rebels' activities, their narration of the past implied a certain political connection between revolutionaries and the rebels. Indeed, the FSA was considered, at times, an institution of protection (Li 2021) against the regime's repression and warfare. Many Lebanese communities shared this understanding and their own militias helped the FSA in fighting against the al-Assad regime.

The porousness of the border enabled the mushrooming of Syrian rebels' paramilitary activities in Lebanon.⁸ This facilitated the smuggling of weapons and food into Syria, the provision of logistical support to fighters, and the coordination of the military campaign with Syrian opposition based in Turkey, the Syrian National Council (SNC). These activities were carried out by Syrians, Sunni Lebanese villagers, or even by Lebanese soldiers, as described to me by a Lebanese General Security border officer working in Northern Lebanon, who recalled the first years of the war (roughly 2012 and 2013):

There were even Lebanese soldiers that perhaps fired one or two shots at the border with Syria, however the *ridd al-nizam* (response from the regime) was always exaggerated, long and intense shootings and even bombs. Shooting was not initiated only by soldiers but by inhabitants of the villages at the borders. During this first period of the war, many Sunni Lebanese villages helped the rebels with their own militias as they were against the regime, whereas Christian and Alawite villages supported the regime.

By mid-2012, fighting in Homs and along the Syrian–Lebanese border intensified, forcing many Syrians to abandon their homes by fleeing domestically or by finding refuge in Lebanon that maintained its border opened and granted Syrians an informal and temporary asylum (Ferreri 2018). In May 2012, the UNHCR announced that 25,000 Syrians were registered as refugees in Akkar and the Bekaa Valley (CERF 2012), a number that reached 65,000 by the end of the same year (UNHCR 2013). By April 2013, the number of Syrians who fled to Lebanon was 428,000 (UNHCR 2013). Throughout 2012 and 2013, the number of Syrians in Lebanon was probably higher, as many Syrians did not register immediately with the UNHCR.

During these two years, the efforts of Syrian revolutionaries stretched between Syria and Lebanon, enacting a form of "distributed humanitarianism" (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska

2023) to manage the humanitarian crisis created by the war as transnational humanitarian actors slowly started to mobilize their apparatuses to deal with the crisis. Humanitarian assistance toward displaced Syrians was part of the revolution's political project. Yet, in certain cases, the solidarity characterizing revolutionary activism also became entangled with other forms of obligations based on social and kinship ties. This was the case of Abu Mahmoud, whose trajectory of revolutionary commitment recalls Barak's experience.

In his hometown of al-Qusayr, Abu Mahmoud was an activist providing medical assistance to injured protesters and enacting other forms of activism. At the end of 2011, Abu Mahmoud and his wife were forced to flee Syria for Lebanon. In Northern Lebanon, he provided medical assistance to injured Syrians, civilians and rebels, fostering ties with several hospitals and local Lebanese and foreign NGOs. He also continued to conduct revolutionary work in support of his hometown, which was subjected to siege by the regime and Hezbollah, and intense air strikes in late 2012. In the wake of the military campaign that became known as "the Battle of al-Qusayr" in the spring of 2013 and the expulsion of the local population, Abu Mahmoud dealt with the emergency of displacement, providing accommodation, relief, and medical assistance to his own community and extended family. As part of this, he first rented two apartments in a town in Akkar, one to temporarily host a hundred people while another fifty people were hosted in his own flat.

Alongside Lebanese families' spontaneous hospitality to Syrians and support offered by faith-based organizations and the UNHCR (Carpi 2014), solidarity networks and socialities rooted in the Syrian political struggle played a crucial role in dealing with the humanitarian emergency. These initiatives were the seeds for the formation of new solidarities and modes of action to deal with the everyday precarity of living in displacement.

Solidarity Beyond the Revolution and the Crisis of Displacement

The regime's recapture of borderland regions with Lebanon in 2013—with the exception of Qalamoun, situated between Damascus and the Bekaa Valley—represents the first step toward the reassertion of the Lebanese and Syrian states' sovereignty over their borders. The regime's taming of the porous border, sealing it with landmines, directly curtailed the free movement of people, weapons, goods, and the revolutionary commitment permeating across the two states. This securitization also led progressively to the end of military support provided by Lebanese villages to the FSA, something that continued in 2015 only in the most northern area of Akkar, Wadi Khaled. This collapse was made even more palpable with the rise of Islamic military groups inside Syria and their presence in Lebanon, ones such as The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

With this changing situation, Syrian activists not only reconsidered their own political involvement in the revolution but also questioned its very existence. Several Syrians revealed that the rise of Islamism, along with the transformation of the revolution into a war, had led to them losing hope in the political project. This failure meant neither the absence of discussions or interest in the events inside Syria nor the erasure of hope for the fall of the regime and returning home. But the revolution as a political project was treated as a closed chapter belonging to the past. The loss of hope for the revolution and the sealing of the Syrian–Lebanese border, however, did not obliterate revolutionary forms of solidarity and their infrastructures. As Charlotte al-Khalili points out, the significance and legacy of the Syrian revolution should not be thought of in relation to its defeat within changing socio-political and economic structures, but within the transformations it produced in the lifeworld of Syrians (Al-Khalili 2021).

Syrian revolutionaries re-centered their activism in Lebanon, where the number of Syrian refugees reached one million by April 2014 (UNHCR/WFP 2014). The scale of the displacement and the subsequent humanitarian emergency required activists to focus increasingly on this new reality and its everyday challenges. This reorientation also shaped the temporal horizon of their initiatives based on the urgency of the present and the near future (Bandak 2023; Bandak and Anderson 2022). By the time I did my fieldwork, the meaning of *nashataat* (activities) had morphed from activism tied to the political struggle in Syria to one of a disparate plethora of civic, humanitarian, and political engagement.

Syrian activists recalibrated the significance of solidarity at the heart of their vernacular humanitarian action. This became focused on the acute socio-economic difficulties faced by Syrians in their everyday life in Lebanon, including accessing education, work, and health care (see also Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal 2016). The initial sense of reciprocity and social obligation toward protesters, activists, and civilians displaced by the war characterizing the humanitarian practices inside Syria and across the border was expanded. The economic precarity and political and social non-existence for Syrians in Lebanon produced new forms of solidarity and a new sense of belonging. Revolutionary solidarity became the basis and a template to broaden the horizons of political activism into new issues tied to the hardships of displacement and, more generally, structural violence (Robins 2009). Among the many activists I encountered during my fieldwork, only Aliya continued to nurture a connection with revolutionary activities inside Syria. However, this commitment of hers was only a minor part of her activism. In 2014, she concentrated her efforts on a self-reliance project developed to help women suffering economic destitution in Akkar (Carpi 2020), Syrians and Lebanese alike.

Syrian and Lebanese networks of solidarity developed in the struggle against the regime dissipated and were replaced with ties Syrian activists had with foreign and Lebanese NGOs and other humanitarian agencies involved in the massive response to the so-called Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. The infiltration of these new actors and their transnational humanitarian logic into Syrian networks of solidarity redefined the nature of the activists' roles and their work. In many cases, Syrian activists became the beneficiaries of transnational humanitarian intervention while playing both the role of volunteer in these organizations, as well as gatekeepers of and 'experts' on their own communities.

Yet, this involvement did not mean that the knowledge and lived experience of Syrians was incorporated into the development and implementation of humanitarian projects. In North Lebanon, I participated in many discussions between Abu Mahmoud and other members of his community who were involved in this type of humanitarian work. Their critique of foreign and Lebanese NGOs was usually centered on their inability to tackle problems ranging from early marriage to limited medical assistance for displaced Syrians. Regarding the latter, chronic diseases and cancer treatment at surgeries were not covered by the UNHCR.

In one conversation about the limits of transnational humanitarianism, Abu Mahmoud showed me and a group of teachers a YouTube video of his from 2014. In it, there was a pale, sleeping baby under many blankets being kept alive by a little machine with a tube full of blood. Abu Mahmoud's voice was in the background, explaining how the baby had a rare heart disease that required surgery that would cost 7,000 USD. The video was his last attempt to fundraise for the surgery since Syrian networks of solidarity had exhausted their own financial resources by that point. Abu Mahmoud eventually managed to collect the sum and found a hospital in southern Lebanon where he brought the baby and his family. However, the child passed away as soon as they reached the hospital.

In the video, Abu Mahmoud was using a lexicon of compassion similar to the way transnational humanitarianism portrays the victimhood of refugees. At the same time, he was also

offering a critique of transnational humanitarianism and its moral principles of alleviating suffering since it failed to preserve a minimal form of humanity in this case and many others (Redfield 2005). Despite this, the Syrian reliance on humanitarian and non-governmental agencies was also instrumental to the survival of their own activism, given that NGOs provided a degree of protection against the Lebanese state crackdown on Syrian activists.

This clampdown created an acute sense of fear among Syrians as the Lebanese state conflated the distinction between revolutionary activists and rebels, between revolution and Islamic terrorism. This was particularly palpable in the informal school created by Abu Mahmoud's community, where administrators carefully vetted any donation and refused money offered by the opposition, the SNC, Islamist groups, and charities with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. This vetting was instrumental for the school to maintain its political independence and to avoid being targeted by the Lebanese state's crackdown against any activity funded by the SNC, a campaign that led to the closure of many Syrian informal schools in Akkar in 2015.

The blurry line between activism, paramilitary activities, and Islamic terror was also at the origin of the arrest or arbitrary detention of Syrian activists at the hand of the Lebanese security and military forces, as occurred to Kani. Arrested in the springtime of 2013, Kani was accused by the military court of being part of the FSA—thus considered a national security threat—and also of possessing a counterfeit *iqaama* (residency visa). After spending six months in the al-Rumi prison in Beirut, he was cleared of the national security threat charge. However, he was transferred to the General Security's 'Adliyya detention center in Beirut where he stayed for 20 days. Indeed, Kani was not cleared of the second charge as he had obtained his visa through informal channels, he did not have the funds to renew his visa in Beirut, which was 200 USD and could also not return to Syria out of fear of being arrested for military conscription.

Despite being released, Kani's ID and passport were taken from him, rendering him paperless. This transformed his everyday life into a nightmare, since he was always at risk of being arrested on the spot, or whenever he crossed checkpoints controlled by the Lebanese Army Forces or any other security forces in the city or across the country. The risk of being arrested in Lebanon and the prospect of being forcefully deported 'to the other side of the border,' Syria, became more tangible as he revealed to me: "I started to be afraid that they'd put me in prison and then release me. However, the third time they hand you over to the Syrian authorities."

The Islamic State's sack of Aarsal in August 2014 catalyzed other radical changes and were the beginnings of a new boundary between Syrians and Lebanese, instigating a process of othering the Syrians. For Abu Mahmoud, the social relationships he developed with Lebanese people throughout the decades suddenly disintegrated when the Islamic State in Aarsal kidnapped Lebanese soldiers from Northern Lebanon. With a bitter voice, he reckoned that for Lebanese, being Syrian had become synonymous with Islamic terrorism; this association abruptly ended his long-term social relations with many Lebanese, regardless of their support of the revolution or the regime. Even during the revolutionary military struggle, social relations and hospitality transcended political alignments.

The rise of Islamism led to a rupture of relations that had previously cut across not only physical borders but also political positioning. Lebanese friends and acquaintances of Abu Mahmoud stopped inviting him over for *iftars* and other formal gatherings. For some, however, the increased suspicion from Lebanese communities and their open discrimination toward Syrians were explained to me in terms of historical anti-Syrian sentiments characterizing Lebanon. For others, this process of othering was a reaction to the oppression Lebanese communities experienced at the hands of the regime, an explanation that earlier in 2011 was a vehicle for the development of revolutionary solidarity across the border.

Conclusion

The taming of the border that started in 2013 produced new geographical boundaries, between Syria and Lebanon and within Lebanon. This process of reclaiming the border by the Lebanese state infiltrated deep into the social life of Syrians and Lebanese, producing new social boundaries. The solidarity that emerged from the revolutionary struggle may have disappeared, but its legacy, along with different forms of activism, still shapes the social relations and political engagements of many Syrians who have survived the atmosphere of fear that pervaded Lebanon in the aftermath of the events in Aarsal. The trajectory of political commitment and displacement of Syrian activists in Lebanon and across the Syrian–Lebanese border highlights how solidarity was enacted in different forms constantly mutating to face the different phases of the Syrian crisis. These transformations can be fully grasped in their significance and importance only by situating them in relation to the ‘other side of the border’ and the historicity of the social and political continuities characterizing Syria and Lebanon.

By disentangling these spatio-temporal intricacies, the enactments of solidarity and their elastic nature redefine the horizons of belonging and the meanings of sharing a social and political predicament. At the beginning of the revolution, the social obligation of giving was forged through a clear-cut between revolutionaries and the rest of the Syrian society. The outbreak of the war and the crisis of displacement put in motion a process in which a revolutionary “vernacular humanitarianism” became central in the way Syrian activists translated their political commitment into practice. While humanitarian work became increasingly disjointed from the revolutionary struggle, the social obligations Syrian activists nurtured toward displaced Syrians persisted to deal with the everyday precarity of displacement.

Syrian solidarity networks may reside at the interstices of the studies of displacement that focus on the asymmetrical relations developed between guests and hosts (Al-Khalili 2023; Carpi 2016; El Dardiry 2017; Rozakou 2012; Thorleifsson 2016) and in relation to transnational humanitarianism and its hierarchies of humanities (Fassin 2007). However, as this article has shown, displacement can also foster more horizontal types of social relations and modes of action with situated political meanings through which Syrians exceed the role of guests and beneficiaries. Instead of de-exceptionalizing displacement (Cabot and Ramsay 2021; Ramsay 2020), I situate it within social and political processes at its origin and their spatial and temporal intricacies. This angle of analysis unearths how the manifold incarnations of Syrian solidarity prior to and within displacement are at the heart of a process of meaning-making regarding not only displacement *per se* but also politics, humanness and belonging.

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■ NOTES

1. All names of my interlocutors are pseudonyms.
2. Although this article focuses on the relationship among Syrians and between Syrians and Lebanese, it is important to highlight that Palestinian refugees also offered hospitality to displaced Syrians (Fid-dian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Holst 2022; Parkinson and Behrouzan 2015).
3. I do not treat solidarity in opposition to hospitality, a central concept amongst Syrians (Kastrinou 2014; Khalaf 1990) even in displacement (Alkan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023) as to a certain extent, the boundary between the two practices are dynamics and may change across time.
4. Interview conducted in English in Beirut in August 2014.
5. Interview conducted in English on Skype in June 2015.
6. Interview conducted in English in Beirut in September 2015.
7. Even for international humanitarian actors, the delivery of food aid was not a neutral endeavor as they faced a series of bureaucratic restrictions imposed by the regime with the aim to control the humanitarian distribution (Martínez and Eng 2016).
8. Despite Lebanon's official policy of disassociation, Lebanese armed mobilization along sectarian lines was sometimes even encouraged by different Lebanese political parties that aligned themselves with affiliated political and military actors inside Syria. Whereas Hezbollah led the March 8th Coalition supporting the Syrian regime, becoming a major player in its military campaign, the Future Movement heading the March 14th Coalition became a supporter of the Syrian opposition (Mouwad 2018).

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