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ABSTRACT

Strong social networks have been shown to correlate with improved economic outcomes and emotional wellbeing in urban refugee populations. In the Middle East and North Africa, social networks are based on a wide variety of relational identities that interconnect, suggesting an array of opportunities for community self-support. However, this research shows that Syrian refugees living in Irbid, Jordan, no longer actively turn to social networks for support. The financial and emotional strain of exile and the failure of international aid agencies to maintain pre-existing social connections and to support the development of new ones have led to the collapse of social networks among Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Feeding and providing direct services to these populations is no longer a viable option. This ability to provide for themselves … allows urban refugees to address their own needs without substantive further assistance from the humanitarian community. (Buscher 2011, p. 20)

They caught me twice. The second time, they made me sign a statement saying I would not work again. I asked UNHCR for help with this, how I should live. They told me, 'If you don't like it, you can go to Zaatari [refugee camp].' How can we live? We can't work, they don't give us money. 'You can go to Zaatari,' they told me. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

There are more than 600,000 refugees from Syria registered with UNHCR in Jordan (UNHCR 2014). More than 80% of those live outside of formal camps, either in urban centres or informal tented settlements (UNHCR 2014). While UNHCR and other agencies had initially taken commendable initiative in supporting urban-based Syrians, in the face of international apathy and unsustainable programming, most Syrians now receive no regular support of any kind (United Nations 2014, Turner 2015, Frölich and Stevens 2015). With displacement of the first Syrian families into Jordan, now enduring for over four years, the provision of one-time emergency assistance has faded into a distant memory; the vast majority of Syrian households in Jordan are now primarily self-sufficient.

The literature on Syria has shown how pre-conflict society was typified by dense, overlapping social networks based on intersecting relational identities such as religion, ethnicity, region of origin, family and class (Lesch 2012, Batatu 1999, Salamandra 2004, Wedeen 1999, 2013 , Rabinovich 2008, Philips 2012, Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, Leenders 2012, Haddad 2011, Hokayem 2013). Scholars have suggested that Syrian social networks act as traditionally protective shelters in times of crisis, in part due to the various forms of capital which exist in these networks and which members may draw on (Leenders 2012, Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Chatty 2013, 2010, Chatty and Mansour 2011, Batatu 1999, Wedeen 1999, 2013 and Salamandra 2004). While such networks persist in exile, new relational and spatial configurations (Massey 2005) produced through

displacement may dramatically alter the significance that various identities represent in Syrian communities.

While Leenders and Heydemann (2012) and Chatty (2010, 2013) suggest that social networks have played major roles in the emergence of the revolution in Syria, it has been unclear to what extent overlapping social networks influence Syrians' attempts to build sustainable lives in exile.

This research examines how social networks and social capital contribute to the wellbeing of Syrians living in exile. It demonstrates that traditional social networks are *not* contributing to the financial and emotional support of Syrian households in Irbid, Jordan, despite the existence of family or other relations that one could reach out to for help. Instead, social networks that traditionally provided support in times of hardship have collapsed under the punishing financial and social strain of years of displacement.

Methodology

The fieldwork on which this paper is based ran from June to December 2014. Jordan was selected over other major host states of Syrian refugees (chiefly Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq) because of its enduring political stability and its linguistic, cultural, ethnic and economic ties with Syria (Batatu 1999). The city of Irbid was selected because it is the first major urban centre from the Syrian border, and due to its cross-border social and familial ties with Dar`a Province in Syria, the region where the uprising first began (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Leenders 2012). This has made it a major centre for Syrians who do not settle in camps: currently, at best estimate, 125,000 Syrians are residing in Irbid Governorate (UNHCR 2014), compared to 1 million Jordanian citizens.

The findings discussed in this article are based primarily on a series of semi-structured interviews with Syrian households in Irbid (n = 46), key informant interviews with non-governmental organization (NGO) and UNHCR representatives, both in Irbid and Amman (n = 20), and approximately 250 hours participant observation with groups of Syrians and NGO staff in Irbid and Amman.

Initial contacts with the Syrian community were made opportunistically through various entry points (beneficiaries of NGOs, volunteers with NGOs, neighbours, friends of friends, chance encounters at mosques, places of work or on the street). Further contacts were reached through snowball sampling; each randomly selected household provided contact information for up to three respondents. When asking for further contacts in the community, effort was made to sample different household structures in varying financial situations, especially those who spent less time outside the household, in order to better understand the dynamics underlying different segments of the population. Interviews were carried out with self-identified household heads or their partners, when the household head was not available. Frequently, other members of the household contributed to interviews as well. All survey questions were focused on the household level. Information that could serve to identify households was not collected, firstly to ensure the security of respondents and secondly to avoid confusing respondents by mirroring typical NGO assessment surveys. This restricted the generalizability of the research findings, yet seemed to be a reasonable balance between protecting respondents while still addressing all research questions. Ages of household heads ranged from early 20s to late 50s, and household economic profiles ranged from comfortable to 'vulnerable households', as identified by UNHCR. Interviews were carried out in Syrians' homes with the assistance of a female Jordanian translator. Participant observation took place in homes, offices, shops, cafes and public places in Irbid and Amman.

Social networks among Syrian forced migrants

My mother lives in Syria. I have sons and daughters in Lebanon and Syria. My husband is in Syria. I don't like that my family is spread out, all in different places. I want them to be together. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

Urban refugees could be highly beneficial to cities if they were allowed to pursue productive lives, absent legal restrictions, harassment, and insecurity … . Host governments and UNHCR could do much to bring about positive

outcomes without expending significant resources, and without placing the host society at a disadvantage. (Jacobsen 2006, p. 273)

In their 2011 study, Landau and Duponchal explore correlations between various indicators of well-being in foreign migrant populations (including but not limited to refugees) and populations of national migrants. They find that two indicators in particular – access to employment and local presence of friends or family – are strongly and mutually correlated with wellbeing in foreign migrant populations (far outstripping such indicators as legal status, access to humanitarian aid or education). Ager and Strang propose that access to employment is also heavily predicated on social connections such as friends and family (2008, 2010). The existence of social bonds – which may be referred to as 'social networks' – in refugee and migrant communities, therefore, strongly relates to successful employment and a greater sense of wellbeing (Jacobsen 2002, 2006, Calhoun 2010, Pascucci 2011, Chatty and Mansour 2013, Chatty 2011, 2010 and Buscher 2011).

Neat, succinct definitions of the term 'social network' are elusive in the literature. In the content of this work, a 'social network' is considered to be any group of individuals who are connected by identifiable common variables (see Leenders 2012, Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Calhoun 2010). This may be a shared identity (for example, an affinity among individuals who share a common place of origin or religion) or may be based on looser ties, such as present geographical location. In this sense, any individual may be a member of multiple social networks.

Social networks are closely related to social capital. Putnam defines social capital as 'social networks and associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness' (2000, p. 137). Similarly, Lin insists that social networks and social capital cannot be studied in isolation (1999). As 'resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions' (1999, p. 12), social capital cannot be understood without examining the network of relationships which connect resource-holding individuals to one another. In livelihood studies, social capital is considered integral alongside other forms of capital in the formation of livelihood strategies (Scoones 1998, Collinson 2003). In line with these approaches, I consider social capital to be any resource which is accessed through social ties; this may include access to information or bureaucratic assistance – known in Jordan and other parts of the Arab World as the practice of 'wasta' (El-Said and Harrigan 2009, Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, Ronsin 2010) – as well as access to financial resources, work or educational opportunities, and emotional support.

Ager and Strang propose that the integration outcomes of refugee populations are based heavily on social networks and social capital (2008, 2010). They argue that social capital comes in two forms: bridging capital and bonding capital. Bonding capital refers to the social links within a community – for example, at a particular scale, one could consider bonding capital to occur within the Syrian refugee community in Jordan, at another scale, within members of an extended family (2008, 2010). Bridging capital, conversely, refers to links a community forms with other groups – Syrian refugees' relationships with local Jordanians, for example, or one family's relations with another. According to Ager and Strang, both of these types of social capital are required for successful integration outcomes (2008, 2010).

These findings become clear when applied to the case of Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. In a 2010 UNHCR study, Calhoun found that social capital has been integral to de facto local integration of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Comparatively, Sudanese and Somali refugees, who hold fewer options for bridging ties with the local Jordanian population due to cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences, face greater challenges to successful integration. Social networks and bridging social capital were found to be 'particularly important for economic advancement, as people need these more distant ties to get new information, about job opportunities or markets' (Calhoun 2010, p. 2). Calhoun also observes that bonding capital within the Iraqi community is weak, especially between economic classes –wealthy Iraqis are disconnected from poorer Iraqis. He suggests that UNHCR is missing an opportunity: by fostering social connections across economic classes within the Iraqi community, more displaced Iraqis would have more access to social capital, with little need for international

funds or complex programming. Calhoun (2010) further points out that UNHCR tended to underestimate Iraqis' potential for bridging capital, considering the community to be cut off from Jordanian society and economy and entirely dependent on external support. This reflected a poor understanding of support strategies which Iraqis engaged in, especially in terms of independent economic integration such as business or home ownership. Failure to consider Iraqis' own efforts to sustain themselves in assessing needs, this literature suggests, has hampered UNHCR's response plans, even as ground-breaking new policy supported the dignified settlement of the displaced in urban areas. This article examines the effect that similar social networks have on Syrian communities in Jordan and argues that aid agencies could produce more beneficial, efficient programming by engaging with social networks on a meaningful scale.

Trajectoral relationships and the construction of identity

Benedict Anderson's seminal theory of 'imagined communities' is a useful starting point in understanding Middle Eastern identity: national identity, posits Anderson, is a social construction where sense of community is generated through a shared, but arbitrary, process of conceptualization (1983). This neatly captures the nationalisms emergent in many of the ethnically and religiously diverse colonially delineated states of the Middle East. Edward Said, conversely, introduces us to 'imagined geographies': structures of power which delineate interactions between communities (1978).

While Said explores imagined geographies of 'East' and 'West' framed on a global scale, these power structures exist at all levels: communities *within* the Middle East are similarly produced, and similarly go on to engineer power hierarchies between them. Identity in the Middle East is not a simple clash of nations. Anderson's theory can be applied to reach beyond nationalism – ethnic, religious, or *qabilah* and `*ashira* (tribal) communities, for example, are often deliberately produced and reproduced through similar processes of collective imagining (Phillips 2012, Rabinovich 2008). Said's imagined geographies, inevitably, are produced between and across all categories of social identification, generating a complex map of alliances and power hierarchies that include nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, family lineage, *qabilah/*`*ashira*, village of origin, profession, age, education and more.

Further, these relational identities are not static, despite the frequent (and lazy) portrayal of age-old rivalries rooted in supposedly ancient antagonisms. Instead, they overlap, jostle, clash, reinforce one another or produce new vulnerabilities, all within individuals and households. In order to conceptualize the complicated and overlapping identities of Syrian refugees, I call on two chief theories: first, the feminist theory of intersectionality laid out by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and adopted by Valentine (2007); second, Massey's depiction of identities as relational and in a constant state of co-production with the spaces in which they operate (2005). Intersectionality is useful in describing the complexity of identity in the Middle East because it rejects the essentialization or isolation of identities: individuals are not reduced to any single identifier, but instead, coexisting identities are taken in concert to produce a complicated landscape which may be navigated (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Valentine has proposed that the significance of various identities is intrinsically tied to geographic location (Valentine 2007). Massey (2005), similarly, insists that space is more than a static location, but a subjective environment formed by an interacting multiplicity of 'trajectories' which have discrete pasts, move towards discrete futures, and happen to meet, coexist and create sets of meanings in the present. 'Identity', then, is never stable, but instead the product of an ever-shifting set of relationships which take on different meanings in step with the shifting networks around them. It makes sense, then, to think of identities as 'trajectoral relationships', as Massey (2005) sees them.

How are the 'trajectoral relationships' of displaced Syrians constituted? There is no research that seeks to map intersecting identities in the Levant (and, of course, any claims to do so comprehensively would be frivolous). However, from a composite of various studies, it is possible to form a rough outline. The three most common identities through which Middle Eastern dynamics are understood are religion (or sect), ethnicity and nationality (Leenders 2012, Lesch 2012, Batatu 1999,

Salamandra 2004, Wedeen 1999, 2013 , Rabinovich 2008, Philips 2012). 'Tribal' relations, referred to here by the Arabic terms *qabilah* and `*ashira*, are commonly mentioned in the literature as influential, without supporting detail (for some exceptional examples, see Leenders 2012, Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Chatty 2010, 2013, Batatu 1999, Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993).

There are some exceptions that animate and complicate categories of 'identity'. For example, Christa Salamandra demonstrates how identity among the Syrian upper classes is highly complex and constantly under negotiation (2004). Alliances shift and re-shift as marriages, business partnerships and fickle taste recast the social plane. Most of all, a reduction of identity to sect, she argues, is completely inappropriate; despite the common invocation of sectarian labels, sect instead becomes an idiomatic label which refers to a large number of intersectional identities, especially economic class (2004). Leenders similarly argues that social networks in Syria – especially those found in Dar`a province, along the Jordanian border – are extremely 'miscible'; that is to say, they easily 'dissolve into one another due to their high degree of interconnectedness' (Leenders 2012), and that this flexibility allows for strategic negotiation in times of crisis. Hokayem supports these observations in his discussions of power structures in the Syrian government, arguing that 'being Alawite is more about cultural and social behaviour than the adherence to a set of religious tenets … Indeed, power in the Alawite community resides in clans rather than clerical institutions' (2013, p. 31).

While identity is often assumed to foment conflict in the Middle East, its binding power is typically overlooked (Phillips 2012, Rabinovich 2008). Leenders and Heydemann (2012) assert that the strength, power and interconnectedness of social networks in southern Syria allowed the revolution to begin and to endure in the face of harsh government oppression (see Fröhlich 2016, this volume). These connections pre-date and break through the colonial Jordanian/Syrian border (Leenders 2012, Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Hokayem 2013).

A synthesis of these literatures suggests that strong, overlapping social networks should play a role in Syrians' attempts to build a sustainable life in exile. Extending Leenders' assertion that tight social networks – especially those which include cross-border Jordanian members – provided a protective shield for emergent protest groups, it would stand to reason that these same networks would contribute to the wellbeing of Syrians living in exile. In common terms, this practice fits with the lay assumption that in times of crisis, individuals turn to friends and family for support. Identities are thus seen to contain an element of potential, a seed upon which social networks may form. Yet, to what extent do networks most integral to pre-conflict Syrian society continue to dominate after displacement? Is it safe to assume that the once-lucrative networks will continue to be so? These questions are important to ask in order to better attune strategies of provision of humanitarian aid to displaced Syrians living in urban centres.

Syrian refugees in Jordan: isolation and exhaustion

> I know some people here from Syria. Sure. I meet them by chance, at UNHCR, or in the street sometimes. Sometimes I see on TV someone I knew is dead. But people living here are too far away, so I don't connect with them. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

The most evident form of support which social networks can provide relates to immediate everyday concerns such as financial care, housing and employment. Yet social networks are, at present, heavily underutilized by forcibly displaced Syrians living in the Governorate of Irbid. This was an unexpected and puzzling narrative that, with a few notable exceptions, was strongly uniform. The following discussion unpacks some of the strains on social networks among Syrian refugees and the causes for their increasing social isolation.

Financial aid was predicted to be one of the main methods of support sourced from social connections. However, no Syrian families interviewed reported receiving financial gifts from other households within Jordan. Some reported taking loans, but expressed fear that they would be unable to ever repay them. Some respondents did report receiving remittances directly from family

members in other states, primarily the Gulf States and Syria itself; none reported remittances from Western states. Many families mentioned rumours that those Syrians who receive remittances from the Gulf, Europe or North America experience the best situations in Jordan, but few admitted to knowing such families personally. Notably, no families reported receiving remittances through third parties; one family specifically expressed frustration that a cousin of Jordanian nationality, who had married an American and moved to Texas, was not providing any support. When asked if households provided financial assistance to anyone outside the family, all families replied in the negative. Most added, 'we cannot help, because we are the ones who need help.' When asked where families could turn to in times of crisis, the usual response was 'only to God'.

Families relied entirely on relatives within the household for income, with intermittent, insufficient and unreliable assistance from NGOs supplementing income. Only families without any working-age men received monthly cash assistance from UNHCR. All received monthly food vouchers from the World Food Programme (WFP), but these were not sufficient to cover actual food costs and were reduced several times in the past year. Most had accessed one-time packages of cash or non-food items from various other agencies. Almost all families reported resorting to selling WFP food vouchers at least once in order to cover other expenses; typically these were sold at below-market prices. Government subsidized bread was then purchased, and the difference was used to cover rent, water or electricity bills. Selling food vouchers at below-market prices was the primary method which Syrians in Irbid reported using to respond to financial shocks. Debts and loans tended to refer to missed payments on rent or utility bills, as well as goods purchased on credit, rather than assistance from individuals.

Households took loans from family, friends and neighbours, where available, but expressed concern about ability to repay. Some households conversely refused to take loans because they did not want the shame of being unable to pay back family and friends. Benevolent Jordanian shopkeepers would often allow Syrians to buy on long lines of credit. Whenever households spoke of loans, they asserted that the loans would be repaid when better times returned. The practice of loaning money in some cases led to social isolation: those unable to give loans sometimes reported avoiding the people who might ask for them. Household heads, for example, would avoid speaking with family out of fear that they would request loans or other assistance which could not be provided 'without taking from the mouths of [one's] own children'. Similarly, many said that they had family in the region, but did not visit frequently. The lack of frequent visits was sometimes attributed to the cost of travel. Others indicated they did not want family to see them in undignified situations. Clearly, isolation was often an active decision made to cope with lack of resources. Respondents simply shrugged when asked why they did not visit nearby friends and relatives; loneliness was frequently referred to as a major problem in Irbid. Conversely, when family visits did occur, they were referred to as a source of joy and a break in the monotony of 'refugee life'. These findings suggest that circles of kinship are shrinking under harsh financial conditions of displacement.

The research found that while social networks were often utilized in families' initial voyages into Jordan, these ties were not sustained in the long run. Syrians often used contacts from their home village to make the trip into Jordan – especially those associated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who would secure safe transfers across the border – but few households maintained contact with either those who facilitated travel or those in the transit groups after arrival. Newcomers tended to lodge for two to three months with cousins or other family who had arrived previously and were already established in Irbid, or occasionally, individuals from the same village. However, all made it a priority to secure their own housing as quickly as possible. When relocating to permanent housing, most households reported their residences were found simply by looking for advertisements and calling to ask. Very few reported finding homes through friends or employers. Among those who did deploy (usually distant) social ties to secure housing, outcomes were mixed: for some, this resulted in improved housing conditions, but many reported that employers or friends would arrange apartments which were convenient or comfortable but did not reflect the financial realities of the household.

Similarly, social connections were not often utilized for securing employment. Almost no households interviewed reported finding work through strong or pre-existing social ties. Most simply 'asked around' by stopping in at clothing stores and barbershops to see if opportunities were available. There did, however, seem to be a certain amount of community consensus on methods to reduce the risks of work (Syrians have not been granted formal access to the Jordanian economy, but most households reported having at least one member working without a permit). The same sets of strategies were frequently used across households: many reported working only in the afternoons because 'the police are less likely to come after 2pm', and most families engaged in the same types of work – sale of clothes, cutting hair, restaurant work or 'bag-boys' at supermarkets – which had been identified as easy to secure but difficult to regulate.

Less tangible, but equally important, benefits of social connections are common. Syrian families extensively shared information about events in Syria and Jordan, especially regarding which NGOs were currently offering aid packages. This, and the sharing of news from Syria, seems to be the chief function that social networks actively serve in Irbid. However, even in this case, some families reported refusing to share information due to the perception that too many applicants may decrease the size of aid packages or the likelihood that households would receive aid packages.

There were some isolated cases of families with pre-existing business skills being approached by Jordanian neighbours for business opportunities. The research found that Jordanian neighbours made offers to help start businesses with Syrians who were perceived to hold financial assets which locals lacked, such as shops or the purchase of a taxicab. In effect, the Syrians were seen as an unusual opportunity to access financial capital in return for the social capital that Jordanian citizens enjoy as legal citizens. However, few Syrians interviewed in Irbid actually had the financial resources to make such investments, even those in relatively tenable situations; therefore business opportunities typically went unexplored. This in part could also be due to fear that informal Jordanian business partners could take advantage of informal business relationships.

Alongside business experience, education was found to be a key type of human capital that held the potential to connect households to opportunities. With proper skills and demeanour, individuals could access a much wider range of informal positions, such as office work or remunerated 'volunteer' positions with aid agencies. However, acquiring these sensitive positions often relied on *wasta,* the culturally significant network of personal connections common in many Arab states. *Wasta* also figured in many other social interactions, and therefore is explored in detail in the following section.

The ambiguities of Wasta

Wasta figured regularly in respondents' accounts of social connections in Jordan. Literally translating from Arabic to the English 'mediator' or 'go-between', *wasta* refers to the invocation of a trusted and empowered individual to help one with an issue or challenge. This could be the securing of a job, easing of a bureaucratic procedure, or tilting of an admissions process in one's favour. *Wasta* can sometimes involve a financial element (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, Rabo 2005) but it is more commonly rooted in common familial or social ties (El-Said and Harrigan 2009, Rabo 2005). It is this social element of *wasta* which demands its inclusion in the study of the effects of social networks in the Middle East.

Any study of *wasta* by outsiders must delicately consider the root purpose and use of this social tool. The frequent conflation of *wasta* with 'corruption' in academic and policy literature betrays a misunderstanding of the place of *wasta* in Jordanian and other Middle Eastern societies (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, Ronsin 2010). In pre-conflict Syria, distinctions were made between inappropriate *rashwa* (bribery), considered distasteful and destructive, and socially sanctioned, positive *wasta*, based on face-to-face contact and good communal standing (Rabo 2005). But, like other social practices, *wasta* has both positive and negative elements. The ambiguities of *wasta* and the boundaries of its acceptability became apparent in discussions around desirable remunerated volunteer positions with NGOs and debates on access to assistance among Syrian refugees.

NGOs offer temporary 'volunteer' contracts to Syrians, which pay stipends well above national average wages. This makes them highly desirable, despite their temporary nature. The difficulties that refugees have in finding similarly well-paying jobs result in agencies becoming inundated by an overwhelming number of applications. In order to choose between hundreds of similar applicants, NGOs often resort to passing positions to individuals known or recommended to them through social networks. This is known in Syrian communities as an incidence of *wasta,* understood to be the primary way into these lucrative posts. In one example, participant observation revealed that an individual moved from one such volunteer post into a new position, with another agency, headed under a mutual friend's brother-in-law. In another, a household consisting of young, single, former male rebels of a common religious minority had successfully referred one another in turn for the same temporary contract, ensuring income for the household far beyond the three months that the contracts normally offer. Once accepted into networks which could provide this type of employment, Syrians were frequently able to find new contracts through social connections (though it would be inaccurate to describe this type of employment as 'stable'; the conclusion of every contract presented new vulnerabilities to be mitigated). Initial access to these rare opportunities was difficult to secure and required a particular set of skills. Applicants tended to be university educated, with office experience and some ability in English. What is noteworthy here is that the social networks which produced these employment opportunities seemed to primarily be based on new connections developed *after* displacement and largely built on pre-existing social capital: the purchase of new networks through education and skills.

The boundaries of *wasta* relations were not always straightforward. A more concerning use of *wasta,* commonly reported by both Syrian respondents and NGO staff, was the use of connections such as family networks to secure assistance from NGOs and UNHCR. The deployment of *wasta* by well-connected households to negotiate preferential consideration in aid distributions, especially the provision of monthly funding through UNHCR, was particularly disconcerting. Syrian volunteers fill the front-line ranks of NGO 'case worker' teams (individuals who carry out primary assessments and vetting of households). Jordanians with Syrian family, and those who had spent considerable time living in Syria, were also able to secure case-management positions, thanks to their familiarity with Syrian geography and customs. Syrians, or Jordanians with strong connections to Syria, were often accused by interviewees of favouring families with whom they shared family ties or other social connections. These claims do not reveal to what extent aid distribution was indeed affected by *wasta*, but it is significant to note that the dominant sentiment for those outside the bounds of these networks was that *wasta* exacerbated an unequal system that privileged some while disadvantaging others.

Unlike voluntary contracts discussed above, deploying *wasta* when dealing with aid agencies seemed to demand very close social connections which pre-existed displacement. Some families interviewed directly reported employing *wasta* through relatives from the '*ashira* to secure aid. Other households circumvented formal, time-consuming registration systems through direct access to aid workers outside of work hours. The exercising of *wasta* ought not be considered, uncritically, as an attempt by corrupt households or aid workers to subvert an otherwise fair aid-provision system. In cases where households admitted to the use of *wasta* to secure aid, they presented these actions as a desperate necessity rather than a normal part of social behaviour. Respondents felt that their *wasta* practices were an informal process of correcting an aid system which they perceived as dysfunctional.

While the invocation of *wasta* proved to be morally ambiguous, interviewees also reported less nuanced practices (in particular, bribery) to access provisions. Some households reported bribing distant cousins working in aid agencies, typically for one-time cash transfers or non-food items. Shortly before the beginning of the study, agencies had cracked down on the sale of the application documents required to add refugees to agencies' aid registries. These sales took place outside of work hours by frontline NGO staff and allowed households to skip demeaning trips to agency offices. Interestingly, Syrians referred to these sales as *wasta* rather than *rashwa*. It may be that in

such desperate circumstances, practices that are clearly shameful to the actors become socially sanitized in order to lessen the shame felt.

Wasta was necessary for Syrians to circumvent any legal troubles. The arrest of refugees caught working without a permit is routine in Jordan. Based on interviews, the functioning police policy seemed to be that, on the second offence, Syrians working without a permit were given a choice to relocate to a refugee camp (at the time of this writing, Azraq camp, though Zaatari was the previous destination) or to return to Syria. Whatever the case, this process is very poorly understood in the Syrian community. No clear policy description has been released by UNHCR or the Government of Jordan; response to incidents often seemed to be *ad hoc* in nature. However, many households reported invoking *wasta* to circumnavigate police orders to relocate relatives. Households also used *wasta* to leave the camps informally. One household head reported a son who was caught five times before being removed to Zaatari, after which the son was allowed to return to Irbid 'through *wasta*'. In order to exit the camps legally and reside in urban areas, Syrians are required to register under a related Jordanian 'sponsor'; sometimes these were close relatives, other times more distant family members were bribed to act as sponsors on paper while Syrians themselves paid for their paperwork.

It is important not to oversimplify the role of *wasta* in the refugee-aid regime. Commonly reduced to a byword for 'corruption', *wasta* is a complicated social tool which can be both positive and negative. However, the extent of the crisis is such that the social networks which underlie *wasta* are overburdened by need. In this instance, it seems that many of the negative aspects of *wasta* are being brought to the forefront.

Compassion fatigue and social isolation

> When I feel bad, I sleep. Or go to the garden. If I feel good, I share it with my family. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

This research found that the vast majority of Syrian households in Irbid did not, in fact, engage in extensive social interaction, despite the strong benefits reaped by those who did maintain or negotiate belonging to new social networks. Even when family or friends from Syria were nearby, households did not frequently turn to them to help deal with shocks or to ease loneliness. These findings contradict both anecdotal reports from aid workers and scholarly work discussed in this article, both of which suggest that social networks should play an integral role in the day-to-day life of respondents. The question, then, became why households were unwilling or unable to engage in their communities.

The research turned to the *histories* of Syrian families' social interactions in Jordan. Respondents suggested that social relationships with pre- and post-displacement contacts were more common and stronger earlier in the conflict. Jordanians, be they relatives, friends or strangers, were more open to receiving Syrian newcomers charitably. Both Jordanian hosts and displaced Syrians expected that exile in Syria would last only a few months. In the context of this understanding, people were willing to host Syrian forced migrants for free in empty or unfinished homes, or in their own homes. Almost all Syrian households reported receiving generous donations of non-food items, especially furniture and kitchen supplies, from Jordanian neighbours when first moving into apartments in Irbid. Relatives working in the Gulf carried out extensive fundraising campaigns for their `ashira* and *qabilah* relatives or former residents of home villages. One common practice was to 'sponsor' an entire apartment building, paying the rent of all Syrian residents inside for a general period of several months. This practice was also contingent on the assumption that the conflict would end quickly.

As the conflict wore on, distant relatives in Gulf States became less enthusiastic about these campaigns and remittances were reduced to transfers between direct relatives. Similarly, the burden of supporting cousins and friends seriously impacted Jordanians, many of whom are themselves

struggling financially. It can be argued that a 'compassion fatigue', similar to that of 'donor fatigue' (UN 2014), has taken place since the initial displacements of 2011. The contraction of Syrians' social networks is hastened as the capital in these networks depletes. For example, as remittances from the Gulf slow down, families distribute them less extensively. Many households also report being unable to help friends and neighbours when they are in need, despite the desire to do so.

The re-establishment or re-negotiation of membership in social networks is difficult, if not impossible, due to financial and psychological reasons. The cost of travel and of hosting friends and family were cited as reasons not to engage in social activities. Similarly, concerns about the reciprocity and generosity required in hosting kept households apart. At a more emotional level, many respondents felt ashamed of a loss in status and were reluctant to allow others to see the reduced circumstances in which they were living. Syrians also revealed a common fear that new connections might produce new risks in an environment of extreme vulnerability. Many families reported a fear that Jordanians would turn them in to the police for illegal work or other perceived infractions. While they asserted that most Jordanians are 'good people', they felt that it would only take one vindictive individual to completely destroy a family's livelihood (or even structure, through forced removal of family members to camps or Syria itself); in this sense, reaching out to strangers was not considered worth the risk. New contact with Syrian families was considered similarly risky, even among those who were mutually known in pre-conflict Syria. This was largely due to standing fears that individuals could be 'spies' for the Assad government – reflecting a common concern in pre-conflict Syria (Wedeen 1999) – or that men in a household could be identified as residing outside Syria and thus not participating in the conflict. The result is further contraction of social support networks for the Syrians living in Jordan.

Conversely, people who have the resources and confidence to make new contacts and thus earn membership in new social networks fare significantly better. This is especially so for those who are able to forge contacts with the Jordanian community. The host community provides both access to new financial resources as well as *wasta* for securing work and legal assistance. Individuals who dynamically negotiate membership in multiple social networks thus have access to opportunities which isolated Syrians miss.

Conclusions

> I don't know about Syrians with bad situations. But some here have better situations: they come with money, or have children in KSA, other Gulf countries. I know them from Syria. Sometimes I see them when I go shopping. They have gold, new cars from Jordan. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

> I don't talk to Jordanians or Syrians. I am afraid people will get angry, and report me, and they will send me back to Syria. (Interview respondent, July 2014)

The collapse of social networks exacts a massive toll on displaced Syrians in Jordan. This can be measured in a loss of the economic support networks which traditionally tied households through unexpected shocks (Wedeen 1999, Salamandra 2004, Batatu 1999), or by the withering of the *wasta*-based relations that Syrians and Jordanians alike must use to advance their standing through education, employment and bureaucratic access (El-Said and Harrigan 2009, Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, Ronsin 2010). But most importantly, the collapse of social networks among Syrians has exacerbated and accelerated the very human hardships of loneliness, boredom and depression. All too often, these intangible challenges are ignored in favour of more empirical targets such as shelter, poverty and hunger, while evidence for the structural links between these two broad categories of challenges are ignored (Calhoun 2010).

The dynamics of relationships and social networks are integral to long- and short-term humanitarian responses. The social networks which previous research asserted were integral to the workings of Syrian society (Wedeen 1999, Salamandra 2004, Batatu 1999) have almost entirely dissolved: the emergent 'space of displacement' in Jordan is typified by a lack of positive social interaction.

New networks have been slow to emerge, in large part due to the oppressive legal climate in which displaced Syrian families find themselves. These dynamics illustrate the relational nature of identity and its interaction with space, as outlined by Massey (2005): the identities which carried meanings within and across socially constructed groups in pre-conflict Syria have been dramatically re-enscribed in the space of displacement. The institutional lack of engagement with these shifting sets of meanings marks a missed opportunity to counter the weakening of social networks and growth of suspicion.

The majority of Syrians living in exile have found no new relational meanings to fill the gap. However, where new social networks have emerged, families uniformly report a higher quality of life. This further supports theories of Ager and Strang (2008, 2010), who find that bridging and bonding social networks are tied directly to integration. Both bridging ties (with the Jordanian host community) and bonding ties (with other displaced Syrians) among Syrians have weakened over time, in large part due to a lack of financial capital within the network. Bridging ties are, as theorized, heavily related to economic success, but are relatively rare. UNHCR and other agencies have not produced programmes to counter these trends. This type of programming does not demand the raising of near-infinite funds for food or tents or caravans, but political action and economic strategizing to allow for self-sustaining activities by Syrians while simultaneously protecting the needs and interests of everyday Jordanians (Frölich and Stevens 2014). The promotion of neutral social spaces, especially centred on education, would support the healing of social networks; better communication networks to Syrians and Jordanians alike would ease tensions within and between various networks. In order to achieve this, UNHCR must operate in the political realm to address the legitimate concerns of the Government of Jordan and Jordanians themselves. Aid programmes should be better integrated into development initiatives which involve Jordanians. The raw material to unite Syrians and Jordanians in common causes exists in the form of shared identity markers such as family ties, *qabilah/'ashira* networks and pan-Arab nationalism.

In summary, the relationships which form between individuals who carry socially constructed identities are not pre-inscribed (this is notably contrary to the assumption that they are perpetual, Biblical-era conceptual monoliths). They are instead in a constant state of flux, heavily influenced by the space in which they play out. Relational identities are themselves intersectional, meaning that individuals carry a multitude of labels which, while arbitrary, nevertheless mark potential grounds on which to forge unity or foment conflict. The groups of individuals linked by these identities form social networks in which social and financial capital circulates. Social networks are themselves then highly dependent on space, are intersectional, and belonging to them can be negotiated as the various identities which purchase membership are re-inscribed. Incidents of forced migration – during which both socially accepted meanings of identities and spatial location are in deep flux – are particularly acute examples of this process. Practically, 'psychosocial' programming should be recognized as a potential ground both to shape the space in which relationships are given meaning, and the process of making meaning itself. This can lead to stronger communities, a wider range of options for self-support, and more socially and financially sustainable responses.

Attempting to sustain the physical bodies of 600,000 Syrians with external aid while overlooking unaddressed social needs – the imperative to improve oneself and one's society – simply establishes a feedback loop of poverty. While aid agencies fail to manage centrally the needs of Syrians – an impossibly vast task – the displaced are barred from providing for themselves both physically and emotionally in any dignified manner. As enforced indignity saps the will of parents and children alike, the ability to cope either formally or informally collapses. This leads to more demands on UNHCR, the Government of Jordan and host communities – and to still more shame, isolation, hardship and suffering. As the Syrian crisis enters its fourth year, and international funding continues to divert, the humanitarian community is in dire need of new and creative strategies to maintain the quality of life for Syrians in exile – institutional engagement with social networks and social capital represents one such opportunity.

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Disclosure statement

Note on contributor

Matthew R. Stevens is a Masters student at the Department of Geography and a research fellow at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada. He currently works for an NGO in Amman, Jordan, on a higher education project for urban refugees.

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