



# Philanthropic Activities During Conflict: The Case Study of The Expatriate Syrian Business Community\*

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the ways in which the expatriate Syrian business community engages in philanthropic activities to provide help to its fellow countrymen in host countries. Why and how did this group of people, after experiencing the brutal war and losing their assets and families, decide to provide a giving hand to others after relocations? And why did some others not? The mainstream media and reports usually describe the refugees as aid receivers who are disadvantaged or lacking resources. However, the case of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople, who fled from Syria to neighboring countries due to the conflict, show that there are various groups of Syrian philanthropic organizations funded by those businesspeople to give help and aid to other Syrians in host countries. Their philanthropic aid is not limited to material goods, but also includes religious courses, education, and employee training. The paper argues that although refugees are usually considered to live in a poor or weaker condition, economically strong expatriates (mostly businesspeople) among them can have a positive effect on the overall difficult humanitarian situation.

**Keywords:** Syrian Refugees, Refugee Businesspeople, Philanthropic Activities, Transnationalism, Diaspora

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# Çatışma Bağlamında Hayırseverlik Faaliyetleri: Suriyeli Göçmenlerin İş Dünyasından Örnek Vaka İncelemesi\*

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## Abstract

Bu makale, göçmen Suriyeli iş dünyasının bulunduğu ülkedeki yurttaşlarına yardım sağlamak için organize ettiği hayırseverlik faaliyetlerini analiz etmektedir. Bu insanlar, savaşın acımasız yönlerini deneyimledikten, sahip olduklarını ve ailelerini kaybettikten sonra, göç ettikleri yerlerde başkalarına yardım etmeye neden ve nasıl karar verdiler? Bazıları, aksine neden bu tür girişimlerde yer almadı? Ana akım medya ve araştırma raporları genellikle mültecileri dezavantajlı veya imkandan yoksun, muhtaç kişiler olarak tanımlıyor. Ancak, iç savaş nedeniyle Suriye'den komşu ülkelere kaçan Suriyeli göçmen iş adamlarının örneği, ev sahibi ülkelerde diğer Suriyelilere yardım ve destek sağlamak için kurulan çeşitli Suriyeli hayırsever grupların varlığını göstermektedir. Bu yardımlar sadece maddi değildir, aynı zamanda din eğitimi kursları ve mesleki eğitimleri de içermektedir. Makale, mültecilerin zayıf veya muhtaç bir konumda yaşadıkları yönündeki genel kanının yanı sıra, aralarındaki ekonomik açıdan güçlü üyelerin (çoğunlukla iş adamları) insani krizlerin hafifletilmesinde katkı sağlayabildiklerini göstermektedir.

**Keywords:** Suriyeli Mülteciler, Mülteci İş Adamları, Hayırsever Faaliyetler, Uluslararasılık, Diaspora

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## **1. Introduction**

Most studies generally label war-induced forced migrants as refugees and consider them as poor, lacking resources, or in a disadvantageous position. The Syrian refugees who left Syria and relocated into host countries are usually depicted as aid receivers. Nevertheless, among the millions of Syrian refugees in the region, various charities and philanthropic activities have been established, funded, or run by expatriate Syrians including the Syrian businesspeople who left after the 2011 Syrian conflict. Until the beginning of 2019, there were at least 806 Syrian-established NGOs aiming to provide support to their fellow countrymen who have been suffering from the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Their philanthropic aid includes education, religious courses, basic medical and human services, etc.<sup>2</sup> Although not all NGOs are funded by expatriate Syrian businesspeople, some Syrian businesspeople have contributed to or participated in these philanthropic activities to help their fellow countrymen abroad.<sup>3</sup>

Businesspeople providing help to needy people is not a unique behavior, especially for Syrians. Prior to the eruption of the 2011 Syrian revolution, charitable activities within the Syrian business community were prevalent. The aid from the business community to needy people inside the country has been considered as one of the important elements that could complete the government's weak performance in social welfare. Nevertheless, the point worth further analysis is why and how businesspeople, after experiencing the brutal war, losing their assets and families, and being forced to flee their home country, continued to provide help to others. And why did some others not continue to do so? Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which the expatriate Syrian business community engages in philanthropic activities for providing help to their fellow countrymen in the host countries.

The data in this paper is based on field research conducted by the author between 2014 and 2015 in Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. During the field

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<sup>1</sup> NGOsyria, accessed January 20, 2019, <http://ngosyria.org/>. (The website is an electronic statistical database service for providing information on Syrian non-governmental organizations).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews by the author.

research, the author conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with 191 Syrian businesspeople; the interview language was Arabic. The interview questions focused on the ways in which Syrian businesspeople conducted philanthropic works and how they consider their helping deeds. A thematic analysis was applied for evaluating the raw data. All interviewees have been anonymized on their request, but the date of the interview, the sectors the interviewees are working in, and the cities where they are located, are revealed.

After reviewing the literature related to diaspora philanthropy, the paper discusses the Syrian business community's charitable activities prior to the outbreak of the revolution. It shows that the Syrian business community has a long history of participating in philanthropic activities. Moving on to the post-revolution era, the paper analyzes the motivations and patterns of the expatriate Syrian business community toward its unfortunate fellow countrymen. The result suggests that due to their culture of giving and sense of social responsibility, after the settlement of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople into host countries, many continue to engage in charitable works for other Syrians. Nevertheless, the scales and ways for conducting these activities have changed in terms of quantity and inclusivity. The paper argues that although refugees are usually considered weak or poor, the philanthropic activities from the economically strong members (mostly businesspeople) among them can have a positive effect on the overall difficult humanitarian situation.

## **2. The Philanthropic Activities of Diasporas**

Most studies on diasporas focus on the diasporas' abilities and the impact that a diaspora has on home or host countries. On the one hand, a diaspora is considered to be an agent of development, as some scholars argue that such communities can play an important role in the development of their original country and that their influence may even reach an international level.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it has been argued that these transnational

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Faist, "Transnationalization and Development: Toward an Alternative Agenda," *Social Analysis* 53, no. 3 (2009): 55; Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, "The Economics of Transnational Living," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 688-90.

communities are peace destroyers that deteriorate their country's domestic stability and even prolong civil wars under certain circumstances.<sup>5</sup> This may be due to their historical context and to the diaspora's conditions of settlement, since these are important elements that influence their further development.<sup>6</sup>

Diasporas not only impact their homelands and their host countries in political and economic dimensions, but also play active roles in the social realm. Politically, when the diaspora's homeland is facing a certain kind of political dilemma or instability, the diaspora community in the host country may attempt to influence their domestic political issues through lobbying or even protesting in the host country. For instance, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora demonstrated their political support for the opposition group (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) through a protest in Toronto while their homeland was in a state of civil war.<sup>7</sup> Some diaspora groups even sponsor specific political groups in their countries of origin by transferring remittances. This transfer of remittances indicates how diasporas demonstrate their political identity through a transnational network and is considered to be protracting their homeland's instability.<sup>8</sup> The diaspora communities show their economic contributions in at least four ways: remittance, trade, investment, and skills transfer. It was estimated that the annual amount of money transferred through the Hawala system by the Afghan diaspora from Pakistan to Afghanistan between 1994 and 1995 was \$50 million.<sup>9</sup> The Hawala system is an informal fund transfer system,

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<sup>5</sup> Terrence Lyons, "Conflict-Generated Diasporas and Transnational Politics in Ethiopia," *Conflict, Security & Development* 7, no. 4 (2007): 529.

<sup>6</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali, Richard Black and Khalid Koser, "The limits to 'transnationalism': Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe as emerging transnational communities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 593; Zlatko Skrbis, "The Mobilized Croatian Diaspora: Its Role in Homeland Politics and War," in *Diasporas in conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers?*, eds. Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2007), 219.

<sup>7</sup> Ishan Ashutosh, "Immigrant Protests in Toronto: Diaspora and Sri Lanka's Civil War," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Terrence Lyons, "Transnational Politics in Ethiopia: Diasporas and the 2005 Elections," *A Journal of Transnational Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 266.

<sup>9</sup> Alessandro Monsutti, "Cooperation, Remittances, and Kinship among the Hazaras," *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2004): 220.

which refers to money transfers outside formal banking channels.<sup>10</sup> Many governments understand the importance of diasporas to their countries. By ensuring a stable investment environment and providing them with specific favorable regulations, such governments expect diasporas to return investments or do business with their home countries. For example, the Ethiopian government has attempted to attract their overseas diaspora to participate in their homeland development, since there are many Ethiopian diasporas that have succeeded as business entrepreneurs in North America.<sup>11</sup> After 2000, the Assad regime also applied a similar policy to attract the expatriate bourgeoisie to return to Syria.<sup>12</sup> Also, diaspora communities can enhance the cultural exchange between host societies and their homelands. This can be found in institutions that are established by diaspora communities to promote mutual understanding between the immigrants and host societies.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of diasporas as aid providers has almost reached a consensus among academics. As suggested by Garchitorena, this is not a new phenomenon, rather those immigrants (the diaspora) have sustained their ties with their homeland including voluntary giving.<sup>14</sup> These supports from the diaspora to their homeland are considered a unique resource

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<sup>10</sup> Mohammed El Qorchi, Samuel Munzele Maimbo, and John F. Wilson, *Informal Funds Transfer Systems: An Analysis of the Informal Hawala System* (Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 2003), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Lyons, "Conflict-generated diasporas," 537.

<sup>12</sup> Tina Zintl, "Syria's Reforms under Bashar al-Asad: An Opportunity for Foreign-Educated Entrepreneurs to move into Decision-Making?" in *Business politics in the Middle East*, eds. Steffen Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, and Marc Valerie, *Philanthropic Activities During Conflict: The Case Study of The Expatriate Syrian Business Community* (London: Hurst, 2013), 172.

<sup>13</sup> Leila Mulloy, "Questioning Spaces: Host Society Development and Diaspora - The Asociación Cultural de Ayuda Social Europa-Africa por el Progreso de Senegal," *Migration Studies Unit Working Papers*, *Philanthropic Activities During Conflict: The Case Study of The Expatriate Syrian Business Community* (Migration Studies Unit, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010), 28, accessed March 10, 2017, [http://www.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/MSU/documents/workingPapers/WP\\_2010\\_08.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/government/research/resgroups/MSU/documents/workingPapers/WP_2010_08.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Victoria P. Garchitorena, "Diaspora Philanthropy: The Philippine Experience," *The Philanthropic Initiative, Inc. and The Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University* (2007), accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.cbd.int/financial/charity/philippines-diaspora.pdf>.

for promoting economic and social development in home countries.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, when it comes to the discussion on refugees — one of the main potential constituents of diasporas — they are usually considered as aid receivers rather than providers. Since the context of refugees is usually that of a war- or conflict-induced situation, not only the academic field used to depict them as a disadvantaged or resource lacking group of people, but also most do not appreciate the differences in the socio-economic composition of refugees. This approach might lead to the conclusion that refugees are a homogenous group that is all socially and economically weak, and therefore exclusively requiring help from host countries or international organizations. Nevertheless, the examination of the relocation of Syrian businesspeople to neighboring countries shows that not only the socially and economically misfortunate Syrians exist in this group of expatriates, but also upper- or upper-middle-class Syrian businesspeople who also fled from Syria. The economic capital they have taken with them to host countries not only facilitates their livelihoods, but also many decided to help their fellow countrymen who are in need. Thus, a reinvestigation of the role of refugees' philanthropic activities is the main focus of this paper as it aims to critically assess the stereotypical idea that refugees are merely aid receivers.

### **3. The Pre-2011 Syrian Business Community's Philanthropic Participation**

Syrian businesspeople used to actively contribute to the social welfare of their fellow countrymen in the pre-revolution era, especially since the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In Arabic, the word for merchant is *Tājir*, which is composed of four Arabic letters: *ta*, *'alif*, *jīm*, and *ra*. These four letters are associated with four other words meaning pious (*taqwā*), honest (*amīn*), audacious

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Newland, Aaron Terrazas, and Roberto Munster, "Diaspora Philanthropy: Private Giving and Public Policy," *Migration Policy Institute*, (2010), accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/diasporas-philanthropy.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> The number and scale of the Syrian charities have grown due to the weak economic and social situations. Soukaina Boukhaima, "Le Mouvement associative en Syrie," in *Pouvoirs et associations dans le monde Arabe*, ed. Sarah Ben Nefissa (Paris, 2002), referenced by Thomas Pierret, "Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria," in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred Haley Lawson (London: Saqi, 2009), 77.

(*jarī*'), and affectionate (*raqīq*), as explained by a Damascene real estate investor.<sup>17</sup> This association of the word merchant (or businessman) is commonly known among the business community in Syria. For example, the Damascene real estate investor whose family has a long history of working in trading activities mentioned that the traditional meaning of a real businessman had not to do with how successful his business activities were or how much money he earned, but rather with how pious, honest, audacious, and affectionate the businessman was.<sup>18</sup>

Forms of philanthropic activities could be demonstrated in different ways. In Syria, there were organized groups such as charities for collecting donations and giving to the poor, or businesspeople who individually donated money to people in need. The roots of these charitable activities can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire, though the charities started to become integrated into society under the French mandate. However, after the Ba'th party came to power in 1963, the charities were no longer welcome and constrained by the state under the pretext of emergency law.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s, the regime began to loosen its control over the operations of charitable associations in the country, which limitedly contributed to the growth of charities.<sup>20</sup> Then between 2000 and 2009, the number of charities nearly tripled from 513 to 1485. Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal suggests that the prosperity of charities during this period was probably due to motivations of the regime to gain funds and the support of powerful religious leaders.<sup>21</sup>

This paper does not aim to discuss the motivations of the regime for loosening the restrictions over charities; rather, here it is important to emphasize the financial pillar of these charities: the Syrian businesspeople.

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<sup>17</sup> Damascene real estate investor, interview, Istanbul, December 15, 2014. See also the quote of Badr al-Din Shallah, the former president of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, in Volker Perthes, "A Look at Syria's Upper Class: The Bourgeoisie and the Ba'th," *Middle East Report*, no. 170 (1991): 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "State/Charities Relation in Syria. Between Reinforcement, Control and Coercion," in *Civil Society and the State in Syria. The Outsourcing of Social Responsibility*, eds. Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal and Tina Zintl (Portland: Lynne Rienner, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, "Limits of "Authoritarian Upgrading" in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 596, 598-601.

<sup>21</sup> De Elvira, "State/Charities Relation in Syria," 15.

The Syrian businesspeople during the pre-revolution era used to actively participate in philanthropic activities. They were not the only financial sponsors of these charities, some even took administrative positions in these organizations. Some businesspeople might also have used these charitable activities to build up a positive image in the country.

In 2002, under the leadership of Shaykh Sariya al-Rifa'i, the Hifz al-Ni'ma (Preservation of Grace) was launched in Damascus.<sup>22</sup> According to a Damascene businessman trading auto parts, whose uncle was still a member of this organization, this charity started off as follows:

*A group of Syrian businesspeople used to gather once a month, and one time they invited the Shaykh al-Rifa'i to join their gathering in a restaurant. But after the dinner, the Shaykh complained that the way they consumed the food was wasteful, and they shouldn't waste food. So, they started to collect the leftovers, asked the chef to recook them, and distributed them to the poor people. However, later on Rāmī Makhlūf became the largest donor to the charity, and he used this as a way to control the operation of the charity.<sup>23</sup>*

Pierret explained that “Zayd-linked businesspeople were allowed to take control of the Union of Charitable Associations in Damascus, which coordinates and represents the city’s charities.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the case of Hifz al-Ni'ma demonstrates that Syrian businesspeople used to play important roles in these philanthropic activities, from providing funds to administration. Meanwhile, some businesspeople would use this philanthropic cover to enhance their social publicity within the Syrian society. In addition to those Syrian businesspeople who conducted charitable activities as a group or cooperated in charities, there were also many other Syrian businesspeople who preferred to donate their money individually without a formal organization. A Damascene packaging industrialist said, “We [Syrian businesspeople] would attend a class in the mosque in the morning, and we would donate some money to a person, and then the person would go to other people (such as foreigners or poor people) and give the money to the one who was in need.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Pierret and Selvik, “Limits of “Authoritarian Upgrading”,” 603.

<sup>23</sup> Damascene auto parts businessman, interview, Cairo, November 10, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Pierret, “Sunni Clergy Politics,” 70, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Damascene packaging industrialist, interview, Amman, July 30, 2015.

This shows that during the pre-revolution era, most Syrian businesspeople actively participated in or donated to charities and played important roles in the weak social welfare system in the country. Their intention was mainly attributed to their religious or cultural tradition. Nevertheless, some businesspeople who conducted such philanthropic activities were seeking to enhance their social publicity in society to facilitate their personal interests.

#### **4. The Continuation of Social Help: Motivations and Patterns**

Previous studies on diaspora philanthropy suggest that due to the diasporans' sense of connection to the homeland and their consideration that charitable actions were a responsibility for supporting their fellow countrymen who were in need, the diasporans provided financial aid and built up investments in their home countries to improve the social and economic well-being of their fellow countrymen who remained in their homelands.<sup>26</sup> The participation of expatriate Syrian businesspeople in charitable activities was common not only in the pre-revolution era but also after their resettlements into the host countries. Out of the 191 Syrian businesspeople interviewed, rarely did any businesspeople state that she/he did not give aid or help fellow countrymen. Rather, differences among them occurred in the amount of aid and the forms of aid distribution.

Although it is not possible to calculate the exact numbers or amount of aid contributed by the expatriate Syrian businesspeople to their fellow countrymen, some cases of philanthropic activities of expatriate Syrian businesspeople suggest that the amount of aid from the business community was enormous. For instance, one of the former leading figures of the Aleppan Chamber of Industry who left Syria for Egypt in mid-2012 personally donated \$5 million to establish a Syrian orphanage for 300 Syrian orphans in Turkey.<sup>27</sup> Another example is Abdu al-Qadir Sankari,

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<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Dunn, "Diaspora Giving and the Future of Philanthropy," *The Philanthropic Initiative* (2004) 4, accessed March 7, 2017, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.601.3219&rep=rep1&type=pdf>; Ajailiu Niumai, "Indian Diaspora Philanthropy: A Sociological Perspective," *Man In India*, 91, no. 1 (2011): 104; Benjamin A.T. Graham, "Diaspora-Owned Firms and Social Responsibility," *Review of International Political Economy* (2014): 432.

<sup>27</sup> Aleppan dessert industrialist, interview, Gaziantep, January 02, 2015.

the founder of the Abdu al-Qadir Sankari Foundation who is a UAE-based Syrian businessman and owns a fashion and hospitality company in Dubai (Paris Group). He has provided different charitable activities in and outside Syria, holding hundreds of development and relief projects, including education, health, protection and hygiene, food, shelter, and community development, as well as reconstruction projects.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Walīd al-Zu‘bi, who was originally from Daraa and has been based in the UAE since the mid-1980s, where he worked in real estate, has donated 3 million UAE dirham (\$800,000) to Syrian refugees.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the Syrian Business Council based in Dubai established at the beginning of 2012 by long-term exiled Dubai-based Syrian businesspeople, also raised around \$6 million from its members to provide food to the Syrians in the country, especially for those living in the rebel-held areas.<sup>30</sup>

The philanthropic activities of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople had at least two distinct features: the providers of aid and the receivers of aid. First, the expatriate Syrian business people’s philanthropic aid was not restricted to their fellow countrymen who were still living within war-torn Syria, but was also distributed to Syrians who fled Syria and were settled in host countries. Second, the aid providers were not limited to Syrian businesspeople in the diaspora who had left Syria decades ago. In addition to the long-term exiled Syrian businesspeople who had already established non-profit organizations to help their fellow countrymen in the pre-2011 era (e.g., Ayman Asfari and Wafic Saïd), the post-2011

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<sup>28</sup> Paris Group, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.parisgroup.ae/pg/index.html>; “(Abd al-Qādir Sankari) mu’assasa rā’ida tas’ā li-binā’ al-insān fī al-dākhil al-Sūrī,” [The leading (‘Abd al-Qādir Sankari) institution to seek for building the humanity inside Syria] *All4Syria*, February 7, 2016, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/291002>.

<sup>29</sup> “al-sīra al-dhātiyya li-wazīr al-baniyya al-taḥtiyya wa al-zirā’ mu. Walīd al-Zu‘bi,” [CV of the Minister of Infrastructure and Agriculture engineer Waliyd al-Zu‘bi] *All4Syria*, November 12, 2013, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/110771>.

<sup>30</sup> “majlis rijāl a‘māl li-da‘m al-sha‘b al-Sūrī,” [Business Council supports Syrian people] *Newscenter*, March 9, 2013, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.newscenter.news/ar/news/view/4552.html>; “Syrians at Home and Abroad Try to Ease Humanitarian Crisis,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2012, accessed March 16, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syrians-at-home-and-abroad-try-to-ease-humanitarian-crisis-/2012/12/18/561a0d76-4939-11e2-ad54-580638ede391\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.393b7fb47fe0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrians-at-home-and-abroad-try-to-ease-humanitarian-crisis-/2012/12/18/561a0d76-4939-11e2-ad54-580638ede391_story.html?utm_term=.393b7fb47fe0).

expatriate Syrian businesspeople also participated in philanthropic activities. Ayman Asfari was originally from Idlib and became the CEO of Petrofac (a petrol company) in the United Kingdom (UK). He established the Asfari Foundation in the UK in 2006, which aims to provide aid to Syrians based on three dimensions: youth empowerment, civil society, and relief.<sup>31</sup> Wafic Saïd was from Damascus, but in the 1960s he went to the UK and Saudi Arabia and invested in the construction field. He later became the middleman for the Al-Yamamah arms deal between the UK and Saudi Arabia. He also founded the Karim Rida Said Foundation (now the Said Foundation) in 1982, which aims to “improve the life chances of children and young people by providing them with opportunities to receive good education and care,” focusing on young people in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and the UK.<sup>32</sup> In this context, the networks of Syrian business people’s philanthropic activities have also become a platform for the old and new expatriate Syrian businesspeople to work together to provide aid to their fellow countrymen, whether in Syria or in host countries. The motivations of expatriate Syrian businesspeople to engage in philanthropic works and the different patterns of philanthropic activities conducted by those expatriate Syrian businesspeople will be examined.

#### **4.1. Motivations of Charitable Behavior: A Culture of Giving and The Philanthropic Diaspora**

*I am a Muslim, and I believe in Allah. It is my duty to help my brothers who are in desperate need of help.*

An Aleppan textile industrialist<sup>33</sup>

The motivations for diaspora people to contribute to philanthropic activities in their homeland are, as Flanigan and Abel-Samad suggest, due to the homeland sentiments that they feel including the sense of responsibility.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Petrofac, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/ayman-asfari/>; Asfari Foundation, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.asfarifoundation.org.uk/who-we-are/>.

<sup>32</sup> Saïd Foundation, accessed March 16, 2017, <http://www.saidfoundation.org/our-vision-and-values>.

<sup>33</sup> Aleppan textile industrialist, interview, Gaziantep, December 12, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Shawn Teresa Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad, “Syrian Diaspora Members

Moreover, those who used to live in a culture where social needs were provided for by families, clans, or ethnic groups, have transported this social norm into the diaspora and passed it on to the next generation.<sup>35</sup>

On the one hand, the motivations of the Syrian business expatriates, who left Syria decades ago and were not affected by the recent conflict in Syria but were still motivated to help their homeland and fellow countrymen, can be explained by homeland sentiment and a culture of social solidarity. On the other hand, for the Syrian businesspeople who left Syria after the year 2011 and suffered the same mental and physical damages of family and property loss as their countrymen, the reasons to contribute to philanthropic aid after their resettlement into host countries deserves deeper discussion. Since their economic wealth has been greatly affected by the ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011, this made a major difference between those who left after the year 2011 and those who have been exiled for decades in terms of their socio-economic situation. Thus, the Syrian businesspeople who left Syria after 2011 and their relationship to the long-term exiled Syrian businesspeople will be examined.

Prior to the 2011 revolution, the Syrian business community used to actively engage in different forms of charitable activities on different scales in Syria to help their fellow countrymen in need. This indicates that the Syrian businesspeople used to have a social norm of philanthropic activity. The above quote by a businessman (who donated \$5 million in Turkey to establish an orphanage for 300 Syrian orphans) explains one of the main reasons that most Syrian businesspeople participate in philanthropic works. In Islam, the “institution of charity amongst Muslims is one of the five

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as Transnational Civil Society Actors: Perspectives from a Network for Refugee Assistance,” *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* 4, no. 1-2 (2016): 54; Pnina Werbner, “The Place which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalis,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (2002); Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, “Diaspora Philanthropy in an At-Risk Society: The Case of Coptic Orphans in Egypt,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2008); Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, “Creating an Enabling Environment for Diasporas’ Participation in Homeland Development,” *International Migration* 50, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>35</sup> Gérard Tchouassi and Fondo Sikod, “Altruistic Preferences as Motivation for Migrants in The Diaspora to Remit to Home Communities,” *Research in Applied Economics* 2, no. 1 (2010): 2.

basic tenets which adherents have to conform to.”<sup>36</sup> As Muslims, Syrian businesspeople believed that doing good to others could lead them to a better afterlife and gain Allah’s blessings. As such, the religious factor was one of the main reasons that drove them to donate their time and money to needy people. After the Syrian businesspeople experienced great losses due to the conflict in Syria and relocated to host countries, the culture of giving accompanied them as it can be largely observed in their expatriate philanthropic activities. However, the amount of financial support of the Syrian businesspeople who left after 2011 has shrunk. “Before the conflict, we used to give money to the poor people in Syria, even the ones who we personally do not know. But now, we’ve lost a lot of our money because of the conflict, so we can only help the people who we know,” stated the Aleppan businessman trading plastic raw material.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the altruistic mindset that originated from the Islamic faith does not alone explain this culture of giving. Pierret argues that in the pre-2011 era, Syrian businesspeople used philanthropic events as means to achieve or raise their social popularity, or even to instrumentalize it to reach political goals.<sup>38</sup> Since those businesspeople used to engage in charitable activities, they were also well known among ordinary Syrians outside the business world. After experiencing damage from the conflict and relocating to host countries, the social reputation of giving turned to a certain extent into “social responsibility”. An Aleppan furniture industrialist stated:

*Even though I experienced the same disaster as other Syrians, my economic conditions are still far better than most of theirs after we all resettled in Turkey. But at the same time, it means that I have more social responsibility than the others since I’m richer. Or the others consider that I have more responsibility. After I settled and established my business in Turkey, sometimes I do not like to respond to other [Syrians’] phone calls even if I knew them before, because too many people call me just to ask for financial support. I would love to do so, but it’s becoming too much. This not only*

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<sup>36</sup> Sultan Khan, “The Nature and Extent of Philanthropy amongst the Rainbow South African Muslim Community,” *Man in India* 91, no. 1 (2011): 169.

<sup>37</sup> Aleppan businessman trading plastic raw material, interview, Istanbul, December 8, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Pierret, “Sunni Clergy Politics,” 77.

*happens to me but to many of my business friends. I just give the money to people I know, such as my relatives or really close friends. This is what I can do for now.*<sup>39</sup>

Even though the businessman quoted here responded negatively to his fellow countrymen's calls for help, he still provided financial aid to his relatives and close friends. This suggests that although Syrian businesspeople may try to avoid the social responsibility that they feel, they still help those with whom they have close relationships.

Thus, the reasons that Syrian businesspeople who left after 2011 contributed to philanthropic works in host countries were that their culture of giving accompanied them and that they felt a "social responsibility" to their fellow countrymen. This led them to continuously work on philanthropic activities as before, even if their economic situations were not as strong. Nevertheless, the ways in which they conducted those charitable activities may or may not be the same as before.

#### **4.2. Patterns of philanthropic works: Individuals versus groups**

*In June 2014, we established the Baraka Charity Institution in Mersin. In the beginning, it was just me and a few close business friends. Now we have around 40 people working together for this charity, not all of them businesspeople.*

- An Aleppan real estate investor<sup>40</sup>

Although it was argued that Syrian refugees in Irbid, Jordan, who used to seek financial help from other expatriate Syrians as their livelihood no longer did due to the prolongation of the conflict, expatriate Syrian businesspeople continued to devote themselves to charities and donate money to their fellow countrymen.<sup>41</sup> The charity provided by the expatriate Syrian businesspeople to their fellow countrymen came in various forms. It not only involved providing relief goods, such as money, food, or

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<sup>39</sup> Aleppan furniture industrialist, interview, Al-Obour, November 7, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Aleppan real estate investor, interview, Mersin, February 3, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew R. Stevens, "The Collapse of Social Networks among Syrian Refugees in Urban Jordan," *Contemporary Levant* 1, no. 1 (2016).

medicine, but also came in the form of scholarships, building schools and orphanages, or setting up religious courses. Syrian businesspeople might either donate cash directly to the charities so that they could buy required goods for the poor, or they might donate things such as clothes or food. These donations would be further distributed by the charities to the people who were in need, whether to Syrians who had relocated in host countries or to Syrians still living in Syria, particularly those in the rebel-held areas.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, expatriate Syrian businesspeople primarily conducted philanthropic activities in two patterns: as individuals or as groups. Although they continued to engage in philanthropic activities, as they had pre-2011, for various reasons after relocating, their charitable networks were transnationalized and included expatriate Syrian businesspeople from different countries.

#### 4.2.1. Donating Individually: A Lack of Capital and A Lack of Trust

Syrian businesspeople who donate individually provided aid to their fellow countrymen in the host countries or in Syria without interacting with other Syrian businesspeople. Usually, the amount of aid from this category was less than the amount from the latter, and most were the ones who left Syria after 2011. This was because the conflict in Syria costed them their capital and caused them to be suspicious of other Syrian businesspeople's intentions. On the one hand, since the conflict damaged the businesspeople's wealth,

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<sup>42</sup> “fulūka al-ḥurriyya ll ḍimn ḥamlat tawzī‘ al-madāfi’ ‘alā ukhwata-nā al-Sūrīyīn fi madīnat Anṭākiyā al-Turkiyya,” [Floka Freedom ll part of the distribution campaign of heaters to the Syrian brothers in the Turkish city of Antakya] *Youtube*, December 20, 2013, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71fp4egS8tl>; “jam‘iyya fulūka al-ḥurriyya - mashrū‘ aḍāḥī al-‘īd - al-Ghūṭa al-Sharqiyya,” [Floka freedom association - Project of sacrificial festival – eastern al-Ghūṭa] *Youtube*, September 13, 2016, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5upOdwaFHTg>; “mashrū‘ fulūka al-ḥurriyya min al-dākhil al-Sūrī ilā dākhil Turkiyā,” [Floka Freedom Project from inside Syria into Turkey] *Youtube*, August 25, 2016, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZifJ6L2iyg>; “mu‘awwināt māliyya muntadā rijāl al-a‘māl - al-Maliḥa al-Gharbiyya,” [Financial aid Business Forum - Western al-Maliyha 2013-5-23] *Youtube*, May 23, 2013, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZifJ6L2iyg>; “biṭāqat shukr min idārat al-mashfā al-maydānī li-majlis rijāl al-a‘māl al-Sūrī wa-l-maktab al-ṭibbī al-Sūrī al-muwahḥid,” [Thanks from the field hospital of the Syrian Business Council and the United Syrian Medical Office] *Youtube*, May 23, 2013, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpKiDcLPjlk>.

they sometimes tried to avoid giving aid. This decrease in the economic capital of Syrian businesspeople also lowers their abilities to engage in charities as much as they had before the eruption of the 2011 revolution. On the other hand, the conflict divided the Syrians into different groups; those who stand with or against the Bashar regime and those who stayed silent. When the businesspeople provided aid, they would be suspicious of where the aid went. An Aleppan businessman trading plastic raw material explained his personal donation experience:

*I used to donate a lot before the conflict. I built schools; I gave goods to the poor. Even when the conflict started and people came to me to ask for help, I did what I could, like before. But there was one time I gave a man a great amount of money, and later I found out that he used the money I gave him to buy weapons. This was not my intention; I totally disagree with armed activities. Since then, I do not give money to groups or work with other people for charities; I prefer to do it by myself and give the money to people I know, because I do not know whether the money I donate will cause more bloodshed.<sup>43</sup>*

This was not only clear for businesspeople who were pro- or anti-regime, but also for the self-proclaimed neutral businesspeople. They were also cautious not to give aid to any people who might be related to politics, since their donations might get them into political trouble with the regime, as in the case of businesspeople whose properties were confiscated and who were considered to fund terrorist groups.

#### **4.2.2. Cooperating with Others: Religion and Regionalism**

Although many Syrian businesspeople preferred to conduct philanthropic works individually, others decided to work with their fellow business countrymen. Those who provided aid as a group either established charitable organizations or conducted the philanthropic works without an official organization. The amount of aid the Syrian businesspeople provided as groups would usually be much higher than that of individuals.

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<sup>43</sup> Aleppan plastic raw material businessman, interview, Istanbul, December 8, 2014.

As suggested by the NGOsyria website, there were 806 charitable organizations aimed at helping Syrians.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, not all these organizations were related to or funded by Syrian businesspeople. Those who participated or contributed to philanthropic works preferred to keep a low profile and were not willing to comment on their altruistic actions, since, from a religious perspective, they believed that when a person does good, he/she should not advertise the good deeds.<sup>45</sup>

Religion played an important role in the businesspeople's charities. Two Turkey-based Syrian charities, which had been established and funded by two businesspeople interviewed during fieldwork, exemplified this religious connection: the Baraka Charity Institution (*mu'assasat al-baraka al-khayriyya*) and the Freedom Floka (*fulūka al-ḥurriyya*), both in Mersin, Turkey.<sup>46</sup> These organizations were funded by 10 and 15 expatriate Syrian businesspeople, respectively.

First, the two charities both had businesspeople who were members of the charities but at the same time were sheikhs or could be considered as individuals with rich Islamic knowledge in the Syrian community. For example, one of the members from the Baraka Charity Institution was the son of a prominent Aleppan sheikh, and one of the members of Freedom Floka was often consulted by other members of the charity about religious issues.<sup>47</sup> The founding member of the Freedom Floka even had “*zebibah*” ink on his forehead, which is far less common in Syria even among pious people than in Egypt and demonstrates his piety in the practice of religion. “The *zebibah*, Arabic for raisin, is a dark circle of callused skin, or in some cases a protruding bump, between the hairline and the eyebrows. It emerges on the spot where worshippers press their foreheads into the ground during their daily prayers.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> NGOsyria.

<sup>45</sup> During my interviews, most of the interviewees who were donating money or helping other needy Syrians, refused to expose the amount of money they donated.

<sup>46</sup> Baraka Charity Institution, accessed March 17, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/barakacharity/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/barakacharity/about/?ref=page_internal); the word ‘Floka’ is a one of the terms of heritages of the Lattkians, see Freedom Floka, accessed March 17, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/FreedomFloka/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/FreedomFloka/about/?ref=page_internal).

<sup>47</sup> Personal observation.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Slackman, “Fashion and Faith Meet, on Foreheads of the Pious,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2007, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/18/world/africa/18egypt.html>.

Second, both charities have spaces especially allocated for Islamic prayer. In addition to the material goods they distributed to the poor, they both provided religious courses such as the memorization of the Quran, the recitation of the Quran, and the study of Prophetic sayings (*al-Hadith*) and the Prophet's biography.<sup>49</sup> The religious perspective of the Syrian businesspeople's charities is consistent with religious motivation, whereby religion not only motivated expatriate Syrian businesspeople but also affected the establishment and operation of charities.

Furthermore, regionalism affected the ways in which Syrian businesspeople used to interact with each other prior to 2011. Regionalism could also be traced in the businesspeople's charitable activities following their expatriations. When Syrian businesspeople decided to embark on philanthropic activities in a group, they have been more likely to work with groups from the same cities in Syria as themselves, and even in some cases, avoided or did not seek help from businesspeople who were from other Syrian cities. All founding members of the two charities mentioned above were Aleppan businesspeople. One charity that was founded by a long-term exiled Damascene businessman in Jordan did not welcome, or would even refuse, newly arrived non-Damascene Syrian businesspeople.<sup>50</sup> The orphanage that was funded by the former president of the Aleppan Chamber of Industry had another four Syrian businesspeople helping with the project, and they were all from Aleppo.<sup>51</sup> All of the executive board members of the Homs League Abroad were originally from Homs.<sup>52</sup> These cases indicate that once Syrian businesspeople decided to cooperate in philanthropic activities, regionalism would play an important role. The persistence of regionalism supports the argument that the specific ways of thinking and acting migrated with these businesspeople and

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<sup>49</sup> This indicates that the Freedom Floka provided children courses including the memorization and citation of the Quran, the study of life of the Prophet, "jam'iya fuluka al-huriya (minhaj al-tifl al-suri al-hur)," [Floka Freedom Association (free Syrian children approach)], *Youtube*, June 29, 2015, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o1hMbGqNVY>; From the Facebook page of the Baraka Charity Institution has many posts regarding the religious courses or speech given by different sheikhs in the institution, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/barakacharity/?fref=ts>.

<sup>50</sup> Aleppan food industrialist, interview, Amman, August 2, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Personal observation, December 12, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Homs League Abroad, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.homsleague.org/>.

continued to affect them. Despite being away from their home countries, previous features of networking continued to affect the ways in which they interacted with each other. As such, the formation and operation of these two charities demonstrate that religion was a main factor that contributed to the businesspeople's cooperation with philanthropic work, and that regionalism was a factor that shaped the way expatriate Syrian businesspeople's philanthropic activities were run.

In addition to the motivations and patterns of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople's charitable activities, the philanthropic networks of expatriate Syrian businesspeople have risen from a local level to a regional or even transnational level. As the quote above shows, the Saudi-based Homs industrialist has cooperated with Turkey-based Homs Syrian businesspeople for charitable activities. This was also observed during fieldwork with businesspeople from Daraa, Lattakia, Damascus, and Aleppo. It demonstrates that Syrian businesspeople who were from the same Syrian city prior to leaving Syria at different timings and being based in different countries after relocation, worked together for philanthropic activities after the 2011 revolution. Other cases include the former president of the Aleppan Chamber of Industry, who cooperated with the Turkey-based Aleppan businesspeople on the orphanage. Although the charitable networks of expatriate Syrian businesspeople have become transnationalized, regionalism under the impact of homeland conflict has crossed national boundaries, whereby expatriate Syrian businesspeople in different host countries from same Syrian cities work together for the sake of philanthropic activities.

## **5. Conclusion: Economically strong refugees as providers of relief**

The Syrian conflict has been lasting since almost 10 years. Although the conflict inside Syria seems to be less severe than before, the chance for the millions of expatriate Syrians to return to Syria is slim. Thus, various reports and studies are focusing on the sustainable livelihood of refugees and their integration into host countries. This paper has demonstrated that counter to the stereotype of refugees as mere receivers of aid, certain economically strong members among the refugee and expatriate community have continued to actively participate in and contribute to philanthropic

activities. They used to donate their wealth to needy people before their relocation and continued to help their fellow countrymen who have been suffering from various difficulties in host countries after their relocation.

The case of expatriate Syrian businesspeople has shown that forced migrants continue to contribute to charitable activities. Their motivations for continuing in philanthropic work are attributed to their culture of giving and their sense of social responsibility to their fellow countrymen. However, the ways in which they conduct these charitable activities have changed in terms of quantity and patterns. Due to their material losses during the conflict, their budgets for charitable activities have shrunk so that they prefer to conduct these activities in a more individualistic pattern. This paper does not argue that refugees do not receive aid from local or international organizations; however, in contrast to the impression that refugees are merely aid receivers, the case study of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople and their philanthropic activities indicates that some members among the refugees might play the role of aid givers to their misfortune fellow countrymen. Upon the analysis of the expatriate Syrian businesspeople's charitable activities, the paper argues that although refugees are usually considered to live in a poor or weaker position, the chance for encouraging the economically strong members among them can yield positive effects to the difficult humanitarian crisis during the time of conflict.

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