

# The localization of aid in protracted conflicts: rethinking the Triple Nexus through the grounded temporality of Syrian refugees

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This article enters ongoing debates about the definition and purpose of localization by drawing on interviews conducted in 2017 with members of Syrian refugee-led Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) based in the border city of Gaziantep in southern Turkey, who were involved in cross-border assistance and support networks targeting civilians inside Syria. Syrian individuals and NGOs have played a major role across the Triple Nexus of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance to war-affected Syrians. Additionally, Syrian refugee-led NGOs have been a crucial link in the cross-border aid effort targeting Syrian civilians living in rebel-controlled parts of the country, areas that were deemed too dangerous to work in by most international organizations. Drawing on the narratives of members of Syrian refugee-led NGOs whose past lives in Syria, diasporic experience as refugees in Turkey, and aspirations for Syria's future informed their cross-border assistance to fellow Syrians, I argue that the work of these refugee aid providers is informed by a 'grounded' temporality. This temporality emerges out of refugees' personal connection to Syria and contrasts with the linear, donor-centric one that informs institutionalized international aid. I end with a reflection on whether localization as empowerment can be achieved by incorporating the grounded temporality that informs the work of Syrian refugee aid providers into efforts to design an effective Triple Nexus response to protracted conflict.

**Keywords:** Triple Nexus, temporality, Syrian NGOs, Syrian refugees, cross border aid

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## Introduction

Despite rhetorical donor support as well as a moral sea change across the Triple Nexus of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding over the last two decades, the implementation of the localization agenda continues to face significant challenges (Stanley & Connolly 2023). For example, it is widely recognized across the Triple Nexus that existing funding processes still disproportionately favor International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) over local actors and that these local actors are further marginalized by persisting power asymmetries between the Global North and Global South (Autesserre 2017; Firchow & Wigender 2023; Stanley & Connolly 2023; Khoury & Scott 2024). These power asymmetries are manifested in the dismissive attitudes that actors in the Global North continue to hold toward the “the capabilities, knowledge, resilience, and ethics of ‘local’ development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors who are construed as weak, helpless, traumatized, and irrational” (Paffenholz *et al.* 2023, 359).

In this article, I wish to contribute to attempts to lay out a decolonial approach to localization by prioritizing the experiences and views a group of actors who are generally perceived as weak and helpless and seldom associated with the provision of aid: refugees. Following the eruption of war in Syria in the aftermath of the country's 2011 popular uprisings, Syrian refugee-led organizations based in Turkey played a major role in various forms of cross-border assistance to war-affected Syrian civilians inside Syria or were part of support networks that extended into Syria. While members of Syrian refugee-led Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can be considered diasporic actors by virtue of living outside their country of origin, they fit the definition of local actor by virtue of their cultural, social, and geographical proximity to war affected civilians inside Syria. For example, Autesserre's (2017) definition of the local includes the realm that is at the level of the individual, the family, the clan, the district, the province, and the ethnic group when it is not a national level one. For her part, Khoury (2017) considers Syrian refugees residing in Syria's neighboring countries as part of the Syrian 'warscape'. Additionally, members of Syrian refugee-led NGOs are connected to Syria, their home-country, across past, present, and future temporalities. Thus, they are particularly well positioned to contribute to a better understanding of the obstacles that stand in the way of localization across the Triple Nexus of humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding.

This article is part of a broader ethnographic research project that was carried out between 2015 and 2019 and that focused on the secondary displacement of Palestinian Syrian refugees as a result of the war in Syria. As part of this project, I investigated the humanitarian response to the Syrian war and refugee crisis through 45 interviews with members of INGOs, members of local NGOs, and local volunteers who were based in Syria's neighboring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey) and in Europe (France and Germany) at the time of interview. While in Turkey for six months (winter to early summer 2017), I conducted 20 interviews with individuals involved in aid assistance to civilians affected by the war in Syria. Sixteen of these interviews were with Syrian NGO staff. Among the Syrian staff I interviewed, seven were working with NGOs involved in cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria or (in one case) cross-border support networks that extended into Syria. It is these cross-border assistance and networks linking Syrian refugees in Turkey to Syrians inside Syria that are the focus of this article. My interactions with the members of refugee-led NGOs involved in cross-border assistance took place in Gaziantep in February and March 2017 and, in some cases, involved multiple meetings. I use pseudonyms for the organizations throughout the article for the purpose of protecting the identity of my interviewees.

A criticism of the current localization agenda is that it is governed by a Western, neoliberal conception of time that inevitably prioritizes the concerns of Western donors (Stanley & Connolly 2023; Urwin *et al.* 2023). I argue that Syrian refugees' personal connection with Syria is part of a 'grounded' temporality that is valued by international counterparts primarily insofar as it helps address challenges faced by international aid providers. Thus, from an international aid perspective, local Syrian actors are valued primarily as actors who can help international organizations reach their goals but not as full-fledged partners whose own experiences, knowledge, and challenges are important to envisioning more effective aid assistance across the Triple Nexus. The article ends with a reflection on what meaningful partnership between local and international actors across the Triple Nexus would entail and whether such partnership is even possible.

## Localization, war, and the Triple Nexus

Consensus on the definition of localization in relation to aid assistance remains elusive and the meaning of the term has changed over time. Localization was initially associated with the subcontracting of relationships with local organizations that held little decision-making power (Stanley & Connolly 2023). It later became associated with INGOs providing 'capacity building' to local actors in order to facilitate these actors' ability to compete for international funds. In more recent times, the localization agenda has shifted to a focus on empowerment, especially in terms of the direct transfer of funds to local entities (rather than to intermediaries or subcontractors) and the implementation of practices in which local actors are in the lead (Brun & Horst 2023; Stanley & Connolly 2023; Khoury & Scott 2024).

Among the factors that have made wartime humanitarian assistance to Syrian civilians particularly challenging, is the extreme degree to which humanitarian aid has been politicized within the Syrian context. Indeed, scholars have noted the historical role that welfare services and food subsidies played in the Asad government's attempt to generate popular support or acquiescence. When war broke out in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the Asad government did its best to maintain food supplies and subsidies in areas it controlled. For its part, the Syrian opposition established its own informal social pacts with populations living under its control through the provision of social services, including the creation of an alternative healthcare infrastructure (Martínez & Eng 2016; Dewachi *et al.* 2021; Gordon 2021; Selvik 2021). This state of affairs meant that, from the beginning of the Syrian war, the country was divided into two humanitarian zones, one under Syrian regime control and the other under Syrian opposition control (Bseiso *et al.* 2021).

The social services that were established in opposition-controlled areas can be traced back to the uprisings of 2011 when, "early on, a large faction of the unarmed opposition coalesced around the notion of creating alternative political governance institutions for a post-Asad Syria" (Khoury 2017, 277). These alternative governance institutions were overseen by local councils. Behind their creation was the idea that protests alone could not bring radical transformation to Syria: "a new society had to be built from the bottom up to challenge authoritarian structures and transform value systems" (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami 2018, 68). As Syria descended into war and Syrian rebels gained territory, forcing government forces to retreat, local councils ensured the distribution of humanitarian aid and the provision of basic needs (including water, electricity, education and waste disposal) while also coordinating security with armed resistance groups. In areas where councils were established, a form of representative democracy with free elections was implemented, offering yet another alternative to rule under the Asad regime (*ibid.*).

As part of its effort to exert tight control over the provision of humanitarian aid, the Syrian government, the official sovereign actor, insisted that all international NGOs operate under one of two umbrella government institutions: the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Syria Trust for Development. This tight control was coupled with the frequent denial or restriction of humanitarian assistance into areas outside of the Syrian regime's control. It meant that opposition-controlled areas, which were more prone to destruction and human suffering caused by aerial bombardments on the part of the Syrian government, were also the most inaccessible ones to international aid providers. In 2014, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 2165 which allowed the United Nations and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid across borders without the consent of the Syrian government. By then, many international organizations were operating remotely across the Turkish, Jordanian, Lebanese, and Iraqi borders, as a way of circumventing the restriction of aid to Syria's opposition-controlled areas (Gillard 2013; Margesson & Chessser 2014; MSF 2013; Sida *et al.* 2016; Wieland 2021). Given the Syrian government's antagonism toward cross-border aid deliveries, which it interpreted as an attack on its sovereignty, and due to the rise of extremist groups, international aid organizations frequently relied on local humanitarian actors, often smaller NGOs, many of them operating from Turkey and led by Syrian refugees (Howe & Stites 2019; Wieland 2021). By 2018, the vast majority of international organizations providing aid to Syria were relying on a 'remote management' model; this model entailed moving their offices to locations outside Syria and relying on Syrian staff within Syria, forging partnerships with local Syrian organizations, or subcontracting their activities to local Syrian organizations (Howe & Stites 2019).

International assistance to war-torn Syria has not been limited to humanitarian aid. In accordance with global policy shifts, it was influenced by a growing global consensus that sees humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding as interconnected. This global consensus promotes the idea of meeting “people’s immediate humanitarian needs while at the same time reducing risk and vulnerability over multiple years through the achievement of collective outcomes” (UNDP 2022; IPMSDL 2021, 12). Initially, a Double Nexus linking humanitarianism and development was launched by leading donors at the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 (Gabiam 2016; Barakat & Milton 2020). Then, in 2017, a Triple Nexus, linking humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding was proposed by United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, “as part of a renewed emphasis on prevention in the UN system in the face of increasing conflict globally” (*ibid.*, 148). There has been further advocacy at the UN level for a Triple Nexus approach in relation to the organization’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), given the UN’s recognition of the challenges of achieving the SDGs in conflict-affected countries. Indeed, a 2015 UN document emphasizes the “mutually reinforcing relationship between development (in its more narrowly defined, traditional interpretation) and peace” and identifies humanitarian crises as setbacks to any potential gains (How 2019, 2).

In addition to humanitarian assistance, the international aid response to Syria has included the provision of longer-term developmental support to refugees as well as to populations inside Syria; it has also included “more political projects” often associated with the realm of stabilization (Houry 2017, 279; also see Wieland 2021). Within an international context, stabilization is defined as the blending of humanitarian aid, security, and early recovery to promote stability in conflict and crisis spots (Goodhand 2010; Barakat & Milton 2020). Stabilization is linked to peacebuilding and has become an integral part of the humanitarianism, development, peacebuilding Triple Nexus (Barakat & Milton 2020).

International efforts toward a Triple Nexus approach to aid in crisis situations have not been without challenges, given that this nexus is made up of different domains with distinct approaches and principles (How 2019). For example, the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence, which many prominent humanitarian organizations continue to adhere to, may come into tension with development principles that emphasize working through governments (*ibid.*). Additionally, Barakat and Milton (2020, 148) note that, given its association with stabilization (which extends into the realm of security), the Triple Nexus was “more instinctively resisted by humanitarian actors” concerned with losing independence through association with a security-oriented militarized approach to aid.

In the next section, I take a closer look at the activities of the Syrian refugee-led NGOs that are the focus of this article. I show that these activities were, in many ways, shaped by the NGO members’ pre-refugee lives in Syria, their wartime diasporic networks, and their aspirations for post-war Syria.

### **The challenges of cross-border aid assistance from the perspective of Syrian refugee-led NGOs in Turkey**

Recent scholarship has emphasized the various ways in which refugee-led initiatives have either filled assistance gaps or resulted in creative alternatives to programs targeting fellow refugees. For example, scholars have demonstrated that local social norms and practices, such as gift-giving, are a major source of humanitarian relief in refugee camps (Harrel-Bond 1992; Horst 2008). Others have documented the contributions of refugees to services such as education and housing in refugee camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Aden *et al.* 2022; Gabiam 2025). When it comes specifically to the Middle East, El Abed and Colleagues (2023) identify three categories of refugee involvement in responses to humanitarian crises: philanthropic initiatives on the part of individual refugees or small groups; refugees mobilizing within their spaces of exile to form informal community organizations or formal, institutionalized ones; and refugee-led organizations participating in transnational networks of humanitarian assistance. The refugees that this article focuses on fit mostly into the third category.

Compared to other Syrian refugee host states such as Lebanon or Jordan, it is relatively easy for refugees in Turkey to create and register their own organization. According to El Abed and Colleagues (2023), Syrian refugees belonging to one of the following categories have been able to register NGOs

in Turkey: an individual or group of naturalized refugees; refugees who partner with naturalized refugees or with a local organization; refugees with dual citizenship; and refugees whose status has been regularized (a situation that applies to the vast majority of refugees from Syria), as in the case of those who benefit from the *kimlik* (local identity card) in Turkey. The Syrian refugees I interviewed worked for several different types of NGOs: Turkish NGOs assisting Syrian refugees in Turkey; Syrian refugee-led NGOs assisting Syrian refugees within Turkey; and Syrian refugee-led NGOs involved in cross border forms of assistance and support in Syria. For the purposes of this article, I focus on this last group, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the significant role played by Syrian nationals in aid assistance to war-affected Syrians inside Syria as well as on the global hierarchies that continue to obstruct the localization agenda.

Within the context of my fieldwork, there was not a strict separation between Syrian NGOs focusing on emergency humanitarianism, as opposed to other forms of assistance, and they all tended to be loosely referred to as 'humanitarian institutions' (*muasasat insaniye*). Among the Syrian refugee-led NGOs involved in cross-border aid and support whose members I interviewed, some were engaged in activities that align with the humanitarian realm. For example, *Wudhuh* (clarity), which was created in 2014, was primarily involved in eyecare in camps for internally displaced Syrians. For its part, *Karame* (dignity), focused on providing emergency healthcare to civilians in the city of Raqqa, after it was freed from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Other Syrian NGOs were invested in activities that overlapped with development and peacebuilding or that were explicitly situated in the political realm. The two such organizations that were part of my research were simultaneously engaged in humanitarian assistance while pursuing projects situated outside the humanitarian realm. *Surviving War* was created in 2016 by Syrian refugees who, while in Turkey, had mostly worked in humanitarian assistance to fellow Syrians but wanted to engage in what they believed most mattered: community organizing inside Syria. Thus, the NGO was "trying to support the Syrian community and organizations to go beyond war by building their capacities and working on their skills" (interview, Turkey, March 2017). Prior to becoming refugees in Turkey, several of the members of *Surviving War* had been involved in community organizing inside Syria. They had mobilized Syrians at the grass roots level "to contribute, to make decisions, to mobilize resources, to have power based on their resources, [not wait] for aid and food baskets" (interview, Turkey, March 2017). Some of the projects related to their community organizing efforts in Syria included the planting of vegetable gardens in besieged areas, recycled clothe drives for the winter, sewing projects, and hygiene promotion projects. They had also engaged in political awareness raising within opposition-controlled parts of Syria so that ordinary Syrians could better lobby governance structures in those areas for needed services. Increased international donor emphasis on 'stabilization' within Syria has influenced the creation of *Surviving War* and its plans to prioritize projects that focused on the empowerment of civil society within Syria.

*For the People*, one of the other cross-border NGOs that is part of this study, is the result of collaboration between refugees from Syria (including a Palestinian refugee from Syria) living in the United States and an American national. The organization's Turkey-based staff, all of them Syrian refugees, were simultaneously involved in monitoring humanitarian projects taking place inside Syria for international humanitarian organizations, promoting civic education (focusing on democracy and human rights) among civil society in Syria, providing 'capacity building' to local councils, and promoting a solar energy project in rural Syria that sought to help farmers maintain their livelihood despite the lack of electricity resulting from the war (interview, Turkey, February 2017).

Finally, I also met with and interviewed members of the *Syrian Cultural Gathering*, an organization whose network extended into Syria and that saw itself as maintaining not only Syrian cultural identity amidst the dislocations caused by war, but also the intellectual energy and capacity that would be needed to eventually rebuild the country. Aside from the *Syrian Cultural Gathering*, whose activities were associated with the artistic realm and did not involve direct forms of aid assistance, all of the cross-border Syrian NGOs that I interacted with during my fieldwork only worked in opposition-controlled areas. While this was not necessarily part of a deliberate choice, the members of the organizations I interviewed acknowledged the difficulty of working across frontlines. Given the politicization of aid outlined at the beginning of this article, working in opposition-controlled parts of



Syria immediately opened one to being accused by the Syrian regime of collusion with the Syrian opposition and made it difficult to branch out into regime-controlled area. My Syrian interlocutors seemed to accept the division of Syria into regime-controlled and opposition-controlled humanitarian zones as part of the reality on the ground. To the extent that they mentioned challenges to fulfilling their mission, a major one was the lack of funding.

Syrian refugee members of *Surviving War* told me that it was very rare for Syrian NGOs to get direct international funding, most of it coming from the Global North. That funding was primarily accessible to the big international organizations like Save the Children or the IRC (International Rescue Committee) which had previous expertise and relationships with prominent donors. According to Samir, a member of *Surviving War*, while the big international organizations were familiar with operating in conflict zones, they needed information about the Syrian context. An easy way to overcome this gap in information was to collaborate with Syrian partners, which is where Syrian NGOs like *Surviving War* came in. Samir explained that, in addition to facilitating the practical issue of aid distribution, Syrian partners have significant experience about “the ethnic background,” “the cultural background” (interview, Turkey, March 2017). Illustrating the role of remittances from diaspora individuals and groups as a source of international assistance (Horst 2008; Kleist 2008; Hassan *et al.* 2021), Samir explained that direct funding for Syrian NGOs typically came from private donors, most of them Syrians based in the Arab Gulf countries, or Europe, or America. Syrian NGOs could also sometimes get funding from Arab or Muslim countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia (interview, Turkey, March 2017).

For his part, Nabil, a Syrian employee of *Wudhuh*, the NGO providing eyecare to internally displaced Syrians, explained that the organization was open to working with anyone to secure funding but had mostly been successful in getting financial assistance from Qatar: “We also try to work with Western and European donors but so far we haven’t received any grant from them” (interview, Turkey, February 2017). When it came to Fuad, the founder of *Karame*, he explained that the mental health support he and his team had provided to Syrian civilians in Raqqa after the city was freed from ISIS had all been on a voluntary basis. Fuad, who is from Raqqa, had created *Karame* only seven months prior to our interview and was still in the process of getting his NGO licensed, which made it harder to access funding. However, he and a co-worker complained that even the work that they had done for licensed Syrian NGOs since they had arrived in Turkey had been on a volunteer basis because of the lack of paid positions. He was able to support himself and keep his newly established NGO going thanks to donations from Syrian friends in France and Germany (interview, Turkey, February 2017).

The lack of international funding for local actors is a persistent issue across the Triple Nexus. As of 2023, despite donor pledges, direct funding to local organizations remains below five percent of all international aid (Stanley & Connolly 2023). When it comes specifically to the aid effort to war-torn Syria, Wieland confirms the difficulty that smaller NGOs working from Turkey had in accessing international funding, even though they generally operated in opposition-controlled parts of Syria that were disproportionately affected by the war. He also confirms the Syrian government’s antagonism to cross-border aid deliveries that resulted in international aid organizations frequently relying on local humanitarian actors, often smaller NGOs, many of them operating from Turkey. These smaller NGOs worked in extremely dangerous conditions, “often facing daily air raids by the regime” and were largely responsible for providing aid to some of the most vulnerable Syrian civilians (Wieland 2021, 76). These NGOs paradoxically faced an uphill battle when trying to secure international funding on their own in order to support their aid effort. In fact, at the beginning of the crisis in Syria, “the humanitarian camp in the foreign ministries tended to not recognize the smaller groups as humanitarian actors and denied them funding” (*ibid.*).

Wieland’s findings resonate with the question of whether the fact that Syrians in Turkey are overwhelmingly refugees makes it harder for them to be taken seriously as humanitarian actors by international humanitarian actors and international donors. Furthermore, this claim resonates with Horst, Lubkemann, and Pailey’s highlighting of a ‘third humanitarian domain’ made up of transnational humanitarian actors who are migrants and members of established diasporas (Horst *et al.* 2016). They note that the work of diasporic actors situated within this third humanitarian domain is generally not validated because it is perceived as lacking neutrality, impartiality, and independence; additionally,

given that this work targets community members ‘back home,’ it is assumed to be driven by the motivation of helping one’s own and therefore not legitimately humanitarian (*ibid.*).

The asymmetry between the amount of risk Syrian NGOs took in order to provide services in Syria’s warzones and the amount of funding they were able to access was mentioned by Samir, from the NGO *Surviving War*, during our interview. He explained that international donors did not take into account how much worse the situation was in opposition-controlled parts of Syria, the parts that relied on cross-border aid. These areas tended to have suffered much more destruction and human displacement than areas under Syrian regime control. At the same time, how could international actors be aware of just how dire the situation was in opposition-controlled parts of the country, given their reluctance to travel to these areas, which they deemed too dangerous? Samir also pointed out that the local actors who took on the risks that the international actors were unwilling to take, and who had intimate knowledge of the situation on the ground, had no means to directly share their knowledge in international circles and advocate for funding and security needs. Noting the precarious position of local Syrian humanitarian actors in the global hierarchy of mobility, Samir explained that

for us Syrians with a Syrian passport, we have very limited chances to be represented in international platforms. We have been invited to many places, but we are not able to represent ourselves in Brussels, in London and sometimes even in Amman... We can be held and investigated for hours in Amman when coming from Turkey... The Syrian passport is a problem. I cannot get a visa to Europe (interview, Turkey, March 2017).

In sum, some of the comments made by members of Syrian refugee-led NGOs during interviews echo the general observation that the localization agenda has fallen short in terms of significantly redressing the power asymmetry between international aid organizations and their local counterparts. A specific manifestation of the shortcoming of the localization agenda in Syria is the fact that, while local Syrian actors have been well represented in terms of participation in the delivery of aid, this appears to be primarily as a result of their willingness to work in the more dangerous rebel-held areas and to shoulder most of the risk associated with such work (see Howe & Stites 2019; Khoury & Scott 2024). Additionally, and as indicated in my interview with Samir, the dangerous work that Syrian NGOs were undertaking in Syria was happening in a context in which these NGOs have had little representation when it came to the decision-making process regarding the nature of aid assistance to Syria. Samir’s comments about the lack of representation of local Syrian actors in international decision making bring to mind Khoury and Scott’s (2024, 10) conclusion that the response to the Syrian crisis “went local” only insofar as it used “Syrians to deliver aid, as laborers; it did not, however, localize or empower them to lead or share control over crisis response in their own country”. While Khoury and Scott focused primarily on the humanitarian aid effort, their findings can be extended to the entire spectrum of Triple Nexus assistance to war-torn Syria. Indeed, international organizations, across the spectrum of the Triple Nexus, have relied overwhelmingly on remote management and aversion to security risks on the part of international staff was a major factor in their adoption of remote management (Howe & Stites 2019).

In the next section, I delve deeper into the context and vision that informed the work of the local Syrian actors featured in this article. The narratives as well as temporality through which my Syrian interlocutors understood their work are an important part of reflecting on what full-fledged, meaningful partnership between local and international actors would mean.

## **Accountability and the timescape of aid assistance across the Triple Nexus**

Scholars have noted that a major factor in the persistence of power asymmetries between international and local actors is that international aid structures are built around the prioritization of donor accountability at the expense of accountability to the communities that are the target of aid projects (Stanley & Connolly 2023; Urwin *et al.* 2023). Embedded in the prioritization of donor accountability is an emphasis on donors’ conceptualization of time. Indeed, Stanley and Connolly argue that linear project timelines, limited project implementation periods, and annual budget allocations are part of a donor centric conception of time that is imposed by INGOs from the Global North on institutions in the Global South. This prioritization of a donor-centric ‘timescape’ ignores how aid processes actually

take hold on the ground, encouraging a lack of accountability toward local actors. For example, as deadlines for the spending of grants approach, the focus of organizations turns to convincing donors that key indicators have been met or results reached at the expense of showing that commitments to localization have been achieved. Additionally, donor pressure on organizations to prove impact within a context that privileges short-term funding and deadlines discourages the monitoring of long-term problems. Such pressure also ignores that the impact of some policies can take years or even decades of committed work before positive results fully come into view (Stanley & Connolly 2023).

The obstacles to localization that are caused by the imposition of the timescale of donors from the Global North on local actors in the Global South is particularly relevant to attempts to decolonize aid across the Triple Nexus. The fact that the local aid providers examined in this article were Syrian refugees displaced across Syria's immediate borders informed their approach to assisting and supporting war-affected Syrians. Their narratives about their cross-border engagement brought up a different kind of relationship to time, one in which their cross-border work was often an extension of their previous lives in Syria.

While in much of the literature on international aid refugees are visible primarily as people in need of aid, the experiences of my Syrian refugee interlocutors not only question the distinction between 'refugee' and 'aid provider' but also reveal the fluidity of these categories across time. Several of my Syrian interlocutors had been involved in the provision of aid to fellow Syrians well before they fled Syria. Often, their first experience as providers of aid had started in Syria. The Syrian staff of *For the People* had been involved with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and its wartime assistance to civilians within Syria prior to fleeing the country. Another Syrian refugee interviewee Fuad, had been a university student in Raqqa at the time of the Syrian uprisings and started assisting internally displaced Syrian civilians on a volunteer basis as the country began to descend into instability in 2011: "We'd have displaced people from other areas coming to us, so we'd go prepare a house for them" (interview, Turkey, February 2017). He was forced to flee Raqqa when ISIS captured it but was determined to continue to assist those who had remained and created the NGO *Karame* in Turkey for this purpose. Also, as mentioned earlier, the founding members of *Surviving War* were inspired to create the NGO in order to continue the community organizing work they had done while in Syria, at the outset of the uprisings.

Scholars whose research has focused on Syrian refugees engaged in aid assistance to fellow Syrians in the neighboring countries of Lebanon and Jordan have similarly found that these refugees' commitment to assisting fellow Syrians often derived from previous commitments that were developed during the Syrian uprisings and subsequent war (Khoury 2017; Ruiz de Elvira 2019). These prior commitments in Syria included not only participation in informal relief activities but also in explicit political activism. Khoury (2017), who did research among Syrian refugees displaced to Jordan, argues that the involvement of Syrian refugees in cross-border assistance to civilians inside Syria should be considered a continuation of the unarmed mobilization that took place inside Syria and that started at the time of the uprisings. This mobilization was a form of non-violent activism that included humanitarian relief work, development, and political institution building (the latter through activities such as the support of local councils). It did not end or morph into either military action or civilian victimhood once the country veered into war. Rather it endured, including among Syrians displaced to neighboring countries. Thus, the actions of refugees in Syria's neighboring countries in relation to war-affected fellow Syrians should be primarily understood as a form of "non-routine and non-violent activism" (*ibid.*, 268) that is carried out on behalf of a cause (in this case the creation of an alternative Syrian state and society); it contains elements that overlap with humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding but represents a different approach to the formal aid-based response to humanitarian crises. Khoury (2017, 267) notes, however, that over time and through interaction with INGOs and regional and international donors, this informal activism was coopted, becoming more formalized, more organized around financial imperatives, and "increasingly constricted to humanitarian imperatives".

For some of my interlocutors, the cross-border work they were engaged in from Turkey was a continuation of activities that pre-dated the Syrian uprisings and war, but it took on a sense of urgency in their aftermath. Elias, a member of *Surviving War*, had been working with the United Nations



Development Program (UNDP) in Syria on women's empowerment projects since 2009, two years prior to the outbreak of the Syrian uprisings. He was able to draw on that experience to promote the empowerment of Syrian civil society in opposition-controlled Aleppo in the aftermath of the uprisings. Elias was detained by Syrian authorities in 2014 for his involvement in assistance to IDPs from opposition-controlled areas, prompting his move to Turkey.

When it comes to the *Syrian Cultural Gathering*, the NGO's formation dates to prewar Syria. It was established in 2010 in Syria as a way to counter "the marginalization of the role of writers and authors" (interview, Turkey, February 2017). Even before the war, members of the organization had connections with intellectuals in Turkey, had organized meetings in Turkey and featured their work in a magazine that was published both in Arabic and Turkish. With the migration of several members after the outbreak of the war, the group reconstituted itself in exile, first in Egypt, where several members had sought refuge. As Egyptian policy became more restrictive toward Syrian refugees in 2013, after the advent of the Sisi government, many of the organization's members moved to Turkey. The organization's mission had not changed in the aftermath of war in Syria. Rather, it had become more urgent. One of the organization's members explained (interview, Turkey, February 2017):

We will return to Syria sooner or later. Syria needs rebuilding. This requires rebuilding the human. Rebuilding the human can't work and succeed except with the cooperation of the intellectuals, authors, and writers.

In recent times, he continued, sectarianism, hatred, violence, and the concept of revenge had dominated in Syria. He believed that "the author serves as the voice of the mind, to minimize the impacts of these cancers...that want to eat the united Syrian body". As part of contributing to the unity of the Syrian intellectual body, the *Syrian Cultural Gathering* (at least at the time of interview) had maintained branches in Damascus and other parts of Syria and worked to facilitate interactions between Syrian authors still in the country and those who had migrated. Thus, the above examples show that the networks built by Syrians who were displaced to Syria's neighboring countries can also be traced back to older networks based on friendship or professional relations (Ruiz de Elvira 2019).

While the Syrian refugees whom I interviewed did not explicitly frame their work as activism, most of them certainly connected their cross-border assistance to mobilization on behalf of war-affected Syrians in the aftermath of the uprisings and some justified their work as part of shaping Syria's post-war future. With regard to the latter, the *Syrian Cultural Gathering* explicitly tied its transnational network of Syrian writers to their needed contribution to rebuilding Syria. For his part, Elias, toward the end of our interview, linked his work with *Surviving War* to "following our dream to make change in Syria," and explained that "that is why we started in 2011" (interview, Turkey, March 2017).

Additionally, the timeline through which my Syrian refugee interlocutors described their work was a 'grounded' one (Urwin *et al.* 2023) that brought to the forefront their lives in Syria before and during the war and their continued connection to Syria and fellow Syrians after their displacement from the country. Their experiences assisting fellow Syrians was not reduceable to funding cycles or donor deadlines. Finally, in their cross-border work, these Syrian refugees went back and forth between different kinds of assistance or simultaneously engaged in them, eschewing strict separation between the humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding domains. Contrary to the linear timescape (one activity happening after another) that informs donor funding cycles (Stanely & Connolly 2023), the timescape of these local actors was of a more relational nature: it was fluid, changing, embedded in social networks, and informed by local actors' history and aspirations for the future (see Brun & Horst 2023).

## Conclusion

As others have already noted, the meaningful empowerment of local Syrian actors would entail access to positions of leadership within the global aid landscape and to a much larger portion of direct international funding (Brun & Horst 2023; Stanley & Connolly 2023; Khoury & Scott 2024). I further argue that the meaningful empowerment of local Syrian actors would entail that greater value be

placed on the 'grounded' timescape that informs their work. Taking into account this timescape highlights the fact that, from the outset of the Syrian uprisings, local Syrian actors were active participants in forms of mobilization that included activities associated with a Triple Nexus response to conflict. However, these activities were grounded in Syria's socio-political realities and based on a political framework that prioritized revolutionary state building and social change. The more local Syrian actors engaged with the realm of international aid assistance to Syria, the more pressured they were to move away from their grass-roots activism and toward a formal response to a humanitarian crisis dominated by the imperatives of international donors (Khoury 2017).

One way of imagining the empowerment of local Syrian actors would be for them not to have to give up existing local frameworks and be absorbed into institutionalized humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding responses to conflict as a precondition for direct access to international funding. Some have argued that successful implementation of the Triple Nexus in response to conflict is not about imposing a top-down hierarchy but, rather, a matter of effective coordination of the efforts of a variety of state and non-state actors and of managing inherent contradictions within these efforts (Campbell & Hartnett 2005; Howe & Stites 2019). While the interventions of local actors can be at odds with institutionalized approaches, they can also complement them in ways that increase effectiveness across the Triple Nexus. For example, while local actors are often seen as compromising important humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality, and independence, these principles sometimes created challenges for the efficient and balanced delivery of aid to Syrian civilians.

Wieland (2021) notes that UN humanitarian aid agencies refused to work with the local councils in opposition-controlled parts of Syria due to their adherence to the principle of neutrality, even though these councils were best positioned to get aid to the Syrian civilians who needed it. Therefore, some donors ultimately resorted to a 'humanitarianism +' approach to funding aid to Syria, an approach that blurred the lines between traditional humanitarian aid and more political forms of assistance associated with peacebuilding and that made it possible to circumvent the limitations posed by humanitarian neutrality. Thus, within a context where traditional approaches to humanitarian aid had failed, the lack of adherence to a strict separation between the different domains of the Triple Nexus on the part of local Syrian actors was suddenly an operational strength to be emulated.

The empowerment of local actors across the Triple Nexus might be less about them becoming more powerful within the formal framework of institutionalized aid response to conflict and more about strengthening efforts to create a space that allow for multiple, internationally recognized, forms of non-violent intervention in war zones. Similar to Horst, Lubkemann and Pailey's (2016) advocacy for the recognition of a third humanitarian domain, this space would allow for an understanding of the Triple Nexus that goes beyond the 'formal script' of the Western-based international organizations who dominate the design of global aid policy; it would also take seriously the role of diasporic actors as providers of aid (Brun & Horst 2023). Instead of trying to formalize the contributions of local actors by incorporating them within the framework of Eurocentric institutionalized international aid, international actors would seek successful partnerships with them. Howe and Stites (2019) describe successful partnerships between local and international actors as forms of cooperation that are not based on subcontract relations but rather prioritize inclusivity, complementarity, equality, and mutual trust (*ibid.*). The emphasis on equality and complementarity might facilitate the access of local actors to a greater share of direct international donor funding. Additionally, these partnerships would center on collective outcomes, which would both require and facilitate negotiations around tensions and contradictory visions (Howe 2019).

Proponents of localization, including international donors and other members of the international community, argue that it makes aid assistance more effective (Autesserre 2017; Paffenholz *et al.* 2023; Khoury & Scott 2024). However, given criticism that efforts to localize international aid from within reproduce asymmetrical and colonial power-relations between the Global North and the Global South (Carpi 2014; Khoury & Scott 2024), it might be worthwhile to center the discussion about the localization of the Triple Nexus on the issue of coordination between local and international actors through successful partnerships rather than on the greater incorporation of local actors into existing international aid structures.

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