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# Extreme donor and media “fatigue” demands new ways to respond to and represent the growing refugee crisis

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# MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

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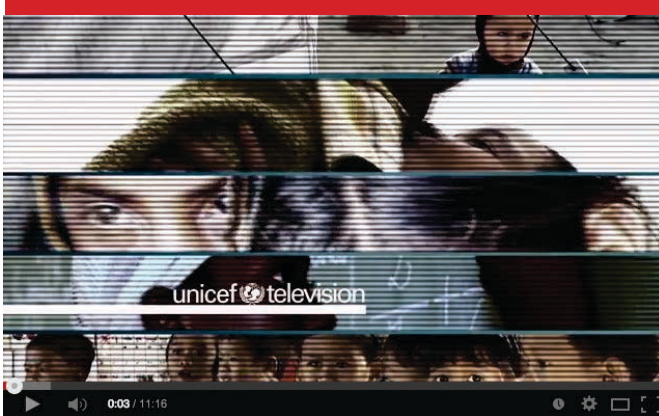
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JUST BECAUSE IT  
ISN'T HAPPENING HERE  
DOESN'T MEAN IT  
ISN'T HAPPENING

## Save The Children, Most Shocking Second a Day Video, Published on Mar 5, 2014

28,243,326 people watched the short story of a blonde, blue-eyed embodiment of the life of a Syrian child



## **UNICEF: Syrian Refugee Children Speak Out, Published on Feb 4, 2013**

Produced by UNICEF, one of their most popular campaign videos showed real Syrian children speak out about their flight and the hardships they are currently facing, This reached only 40,000 hits on Youtube®, despite the organisation's sizeable platform.

As media institutions and NGOs are faced with a growing de-sensitisation regarding the Syrian revolution, which has turned into a vicious war, new methods are put into practice. Do they reveal some underlying imperialist paradigm of racism and irresponsibility which is saying, "Just because it is not happening here doesn't mean it isn't happening"? This approach assumes that viewers' only comprehension of the atrocities is if refugees both look like "us" and have surroundings similar to "ours". Does this make us face up to the hypocrisy of our anti-discrimination? Is it a case of desperate means to an end in order to save lives?

Over the past year, the widespread desensitisation of Europeans and Americans has been detected in attitudes towards the Syrian uprising. In 2013 the main coordinator of over 100 NGOs working in Syria, the UNHCR, received just 68 per cent of the \$1.5 billion pledged by donor countries to meet the needs of the growing number of those displaced. Tragically, this year, only 14 per cent of the current UNHCR appeal has been raised. News of the shelling,

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bombings and rising death toll has led to “donor fatigue” making life very difficult for the UN body, which is trying to bridge a funding gap of 86 per cent.

Political and economic compromises have put a strain on the plans for the response to the extraordinary needs of the refugees with means which are completely inadequate to cope. To-date, refugees have been consoled by the thought that their situation is temporary but now, as experts warn that their return to their homes could take up to ten years to materialise, new approaches by the international community are needed, on the humanitarian, legislative, geopolitical and media levels.

There is a big demand for humanitarian assistance to ease dire situations around the world but agencies have limited capacity. Are we shifting our focus, even subconsciously, away from finding a solution to the conflict by “normalising” aid to Lebanon, for example, where a quarter of the population now has refugee status? From that perspective, we have to ask if we have failed with our aid or if successful aid distribution is diverting attention from finding a proper and lasting solution.

With a drastic reduction in donor support weakening the aid agencies’ options, the academic discourse on refugees has also changed. Some look into the culture of being an aid recipient and advocate within the camps; they highlight the importance of dignity within this role. Such representation recognises displaced people as politicised beings, whilst also calling attention to their position as markers of internal political struggles within host countries.

## **Changing Humanitarian Response**

The current requirement for the UNHCR appeal is \$4.2 billion by the end of this year, a staggering figure which highlights the massive undertaking of taking care of so many refugees.

To try and remedy this funding deficit, UNHCR will start working with development actors on the ground and stop using the apparently ingrained strategies that humanitarian aid agencies have usually employed.

Shaden Khallaf, Policy Officer at UNHCR, explained that they face key policy challenges with 2.5 million refugees in the region. The balance between respecting international human rights law whilst keeping borders open seems to be the main concern. A maximum capacity to assist is measured against how to maintain access to asylum for Syrian refugees; it is a person's right to seek safety from a dangerous situation. "How do we reassure governments and alleviate their concerns about security and economic and political tensions that an influx is likely to create?" asked Khallaf.

Around 30 per cent of UNHCR's personnel are working for Syrian refugees, which has detracted attention from other crises. This highlights the importance dealing with Syria and has "re-defined humanitarian aid" according to Khallaf. Increasingly having to cooperate with NGOs and municipalities on the ground, UNHCR assistance puts its already bureaucratic structure at risk from complications generated by new agencies. Nevertheless, Khallaf emphasised the need to involve locals to ensure support for host communities with high concentrations of refugees, as well as to alleviate financial gaps in their current provision.

A third challenge is the 85 per cent of Syrian refugees who have been accommodated outside official camps in urban and semi-urban "dwellings". NGOs have adapted outreach methods in the 1,600 different locations in which refugees are living in Lebanon. So far, inventive approaches have been more or less introduced successfully; methods such as the use of text messages, for example, to inform NGOs when assistance is needed and using an ATM system for cash distribution.

Host communities are paying a price. "As a result of the crisis, Lebanon has experienced a population growth it was only expecting by the end of 2050," explained Khallaf. This is putting a significant strain on the infrastructure and ability to deliver services. The incredible pressure on host countries and regional actors, and the lack of sufficient funds to cope, means that help from local municipalities and NGOs is essential. "We need to strengthen communities to respond to the influx, whilst making sure host communities benefit from the projects," Khallaf said. For

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example, when UNHCR opens a clinic it should serve both the host community and refugees.

A long-term issue has been the sustainability of funding because interest in particular crises can often be politicised and linked to interest, Khallaf pointed out. “It doesn’t necessarily always match the needs on the ground.” This runs a high risk of media and donor “fatigue” and, as a result, budgets shrink and the scope of the humanitarian mission will narrow. UNHCR must, therefore, target, prioritise and be even more selective than now, in terms of who gets what. It is, as Khallaf notes, “a painful and difficult task to undertake.”

The Danish Refugee Council in Lebanon, like other humanitarian groups working on the Syria response, is very aware of the reduction in funds affecting their work. The DRC’s Grants and Communications Manager, Rachel Routley, confirmed to MEMO that donor fatigue is a reality. “Looking ahead to the rest of the year and into 2015 we are very concerned about the implications of an ongoing crisis with reduced funds,” she said.

In a context where the need is growing and aid funding fails to match it, Routley explained how the refugee council, like other NGOs, has chosen to shift to a more community-based system. She said that their new approach is to condense and centralise services. Safe spaces are set up in which people in need can access a number of services in one place; from psychosocial support to skills training and awareness sessions. While they continue their outreach programmes to the most vulnerable, activities previously held in several different areas are now consolidated in one community centre. This, however, is challenged by the continuing trend of the Syrians being dispersed widely across Lebanon.

According to Routley, the existence of other crises requiring the attention of the international community means that the reduction in aid funding is a “natural reaction”. That this is the largest humanitarian crisis at the moment, she stressed, only adds to the gap between the needs of an effective response and the funds provided.

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## Conveying “crisis” and appeal

During a recent panel discussion hosted by one of Lebanon’s leading research bodies, the Issam Fares Institute, the implications of media coverage suggested some degree of fatigue with a knock-on effect on donors, whose interest is dwindling. According to UNHCR’s weekly funding assessment, Syria’s regional response plan received a total of \$616,401,115 which means that there is an 86 per cent shortfall; this will have a direct impact on the provision for refugees in Syria.

The bestselling novelist and former refugee, Khaled Hosseini, visited a Syrian refugee camp in Northern Iraq last week in his position as UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador. He met with young children who pass their time by writing; they have been out of school for over two years. Hosseini emphasised the importance of telling stories from within the camps because “people don’t necessarily connect with statistics, matrix and numbers, but they do connect with human stories.”

According to the BBC’s Lina Sinjab, part of the issue of representing the crisis is that many writers do not consider the influence that their work has on the public’s knowledge and attitude on the topic. The representational struggle, often created by a lack of detail and context, can be illustrated by the use of the terms “sectarianism” or “sectarian war” to describe the dynamics on the ground. “This has been chosen as an ‘easy way out’ for many journalists,” argues Sinjab, “neglecting the granular complexity of government confrontations, witnessed in Syria.” The war has confused readers and, according to Sinjab this is largely down to the media coverage of the crisis and its prelude of social demand and resistance.

Ambiguous and obscure terminology witnessed in the “sectarianisation” of the uprising-turned-war has misrepresented the situation and made it unclear for readers. The revolution began with government forces fighting against unorganised, armed resistance, with some sects like the Druze and Alawites participating in this movement. There are still some sects involved, not in the armed resistance per se, but as a part of, rather than

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the defining entity within, civil society movements. Members of sects have been detained by government forces regardless of their sectarian or faith background.

Journalists channelling a plethora of opinions and agendas into a coherent and easy-to-read piece have a tendency to compartmentalise the situation, simplifying the theme and capturing the mood of the situation. Uprising, conflict and then war; people do not grasp what is happening. Sinjab observes that for some people this is war, and they do not necessarily wish to know more of the details. “We can more or less blame this on the media,” she claimed.

There is always going to be a predictable framework looked for by reporters with limited resources and time for more detailed representation. This opens the sincerity and objectivity of the resulting piece to question. Anne Bernard, the New York Times bureau chief in Beirut, explained how she struggles to remedy this lack of clarity by inserting greater detail, as she is met by constant “pressure from above”. As a journalist, she described the responsibility to be simplistic, in order “to be followed by the layperson”. Reporters are caught between the assumptions that readers know nothing about the region and need to have events contextualised, whilst facing oversimplification of an issue. “We are faced with this every single day... This push and pull is very common.”

According to the director of the Dox Box Syrian Film Festival, Orwa Nyrabia, the decision over which terminology to use is always rational and conscious. He witnessed the 1982 massacre in the city of Homs where 20,000 were killed. This was identified as the biggest massacre in the region, but was first reported six weeks after it happened. To this day, not a single photograph exists to document what happened there. This was always determined as “the event” because calling it a “massacre” would have been a huge political statement, enough for you to be killed. Nyrabia was detained weekly during the incident and is convinced that the government interrogator preferred to use the term “crisis”. The term used in the media is that which is used by the military. Crisis,

he argued, is an inaccurate term. "It is not that the Syrian people decided in 2011 to go out 'crising'."

Later on the term used was "conflict"; then it became the "civil war". According to Nyrabia, "war" is a way of saying, "I don't care". "Its use can be rationalised in a hundred ways... but the choice of what we call it is a rational conscious choice that defines our position towards it."

The use of such terminology, he says, suggests that there are two sides to the conflict and thus a need for peace between the two. This is used by journalists and political rhetoric, says Nyrabia, "but we don't need peace; that lame proposition is not what we are looking for."

Sahar Mandour is an editor and journalist for the Lebanese newspaper *As Safir*. She takes a similar view and has an issue with naming a crisis "an event", as it claims to represent the whole past three years in Syria. Each war is given a name and "historical events" would be a generic term, but what is happening now in Syria did not kick off at the beginning of the revolution in March 2012. It is part of a process within a wider context. "We use 'war' to describe opposition, not about what is happening on the ground," she explained. Once we talk about civil war, sectarian war, uprising, martyrdom and so on, "we are taking a political stand". Naming is a powerful tool to create people's perception of what is happening, a position of which journalists and reporters must be aware. She stated that there is "no common terminology" for any of these things, but if you decipher the meaning and definitions behind a term, such as "events", the political fault-lines are deeply rooted.

One journalist who believes that the media takes a subjective position on what is happening in Syria is Lebanon's Ali Hashem. He resigned after just one year with Al-Jazeera in Beirut, citing the "bias" in its coverage of Syria. He accused the Qatari government of pushing Al Jazeera towards "media suicide".

"There is no longer any independent media," Hashem told Russia

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Today. The agenda is set by whoever is paying the bills of the media outlet, he claimed. Many would argue that there could never be a completely independent media or even a completely unbiased or objective journalist. “Truth” is relative as it is usually propounded through varying frames of reference by people with unique ways of making sense of the world around them.

Given the fact that most journalists are not allowed into Syria, they must cover the story from afar. Hashem explained that this forces journalists to rely on news streams coming out of the country; politicised and ambiguous though they may be, they remain the primary source of information. In a war of contradictory accounts, various groups have no trouble finding supporting visual and audio evidence for their stories. Hashem repeated the old saying that “truth is the first victim of war” and all parties are guilty of this.

Only a couple of months into the war, reporting became pre-occupied with the humanitarian aspect rather than the political dynamics within Syria. According to historian and journalist Vijay Prashad, capturing the mood of a situation is the main task for reporters, as a remedy for the fault-lines behind covering conflicts. In this context, the use of social media is often discussed. An instant democratic form of “public journalism”, social media give us a granular perspective of activities within the country, as well as a plethora of voices and truths.

Countering sweeping generalisations can be done by giving the conflict a human face. This, claims Nyrabia, furthers objectiveness and makes the viewer or reader identify with the individuals and their circumstances. Campaign videos such as those noted above demonstrate that humanising a story can also have its challenges.

Nyrabia detects an “anthropological obsession”, invasive in the sense that if we want to have an impact on the citizenship of the Syrian refugees in the region what is then the meaning of knowing more about Syrian society? “We want to treat these refugees as citizens, equal human beings, so why should we understand sectarian splits... to give the right kind of assistance?”

The BBC's Lina Sinjab argues that Syria fatigue on the audience level is caused by too much gravity over the bloodshed and the losses which give the impression that humanity cannot cope so people decide to switch off and prefer not to know about it. There is also the repetitive aspect of watching death and destruction every day; Sinjab noted that even the UN has decided not to count the number of people being killed in Syria.

A growing trend to humanise the story to counter such fatigue has been detected across the newspapers covering the Middle East and Asia in particular. However, this could confuse readers who might find themselves “relating” to a war criminal after reading articles that have been written in this style. Another issue is the countering of the “cold hard facts” which journalists are expected to provide, due to their professional responsibility to keep the public informed.

Although it does not go down well in some quarters, we need to accept the politicisation of journalism. To avoid the epistemological black hole of information on one hand, and a general claim to know the “objective truth” on the other, we could be rescued by journalists self-positioning themselves for the sake of clarity. This would also change the readers’ responsibility and give them more agency to pick and choose, and shape their own opinion from the myriad of truths presented to them. Any argument about precision would move towards a collective responsibility to strive for objectivity. If it means humanising and giving stories more detail to remedy reader fatigue, then all well and good, especially as we are witnessing this effect trickling down to create donor fatigue, completing the ingrained representational downward spiral, in which the “third world subject” representations come to shape the life of the subject rather than the other way around.

As Nyrabia puts it, “If we want to rid ourselves of the growing dependence and opportunistic aid recipient culture, I think that we start from dealing with them [refugees] as individual citizens who should be treated equally, with respect.”

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## Politicised individuals

New approaches have also been explored in relation to refugees' on the ground representation. The politicisation of the refugee situation, particularly observed in the case of Turkey's internal political flux, is where refugees often find themselves caught. We tend to forget that refugees are politicised individuals and their situation gets caught easily within internal political struggles.

Anthropologist Dr Seay Ozden pointed out that Turkmans and Kurdish refugees coming from various regions and sects had asked for separate camps, because they did not feel safe living together. When aid agencies were not able to accommodate this desire, they decided to live outside the camps, despite having to travel far to get assistance and food from the NGOs. The Turkish government eventually decided to provide them with aid and shelter. The manner in which the aid was distributed stirred-up conflicts with the Turkish government, as no one was allowed into the camps. Refugees act according to their political selves, and at the same time risk becoming a political marker of what is being discussed in Turkish politics, notably the transparency of the administration.

Stereotypical connotations about being refugees are often contested in on the ground experiences and become reflected in the way we respond to their situation. MEMO met with Dr Rochelle Davies from Georgetown University to talk about humanitarian aid assistance and the assumptions of refugees in Jordan, where she spent seven years. People fleeing chaos and instability in their home country cross the border and are registered and referred to as refugees; this often causes some identity problems. "People who are giving, in some way shape how they want refugees to react to them'" said Davies. She explained that people come to learn refugee culture which covers being an aid recipient. This is a gradual process of learning how to act within a local, national and international aid distribution system.

The systems and processes used by the aid agencies also adapt. For example, food vouchers have been replaced with cash to give the recipients some dignity and allow them to contribute to their new local economy. "It's not a one-way street, where

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they[refugees] are just an empty cup, waiting to be filled,” insists Davies. They learn to make sense of their own lives, in the situation they are in: how they do it, what they benefit from it, and how.

## **Syrians working for Syrians in Shatila Camp**

In the busy Shatila refugee camp refugees have launched their own NGO, which is registered as such with the Lebanese government. Founded in 2012, Basmeh & Zeitooneh (“a smile and an olive”) was founded by Syrians and is gaining ground within the community by providing specialised women’s projects, free English lessons for everyone and outreach programmes. It has opened the doors to a school for 300 Syrian children as well as a desperately-needed shelter programme. The medium of education is English to ease access to education later on. The curriculum is Lebanese, as students with Syrian examination certificates have struggled to have them approved by Lebanon’s ministry of education; such approval would, it is claimed, give the Syrian ministry of education official Lebanese recognition and thus negate the government’s neutrality towards the war.

Project coordinator Reem Al-Haswani explained how refugees coming to their project are well aware of their responsibilities but “no one knows what their rights are as refugees” so that they can shape their children’s education, for example. Other NGO assessment schemes determine what is needed but at B&Z it is the refugees who can participate and be in dialogue about their needs and how to meet them.

Al-Haswani explained how she set up a women’s embroidery workshop, hired a sewing teacher for the women, a space for women to meet and produce beautifully handcrafted Palestinian pieces as well as giving them what they needed; a space to meet and reflect on their situation.

She laughed and told me how as soon as they started making money their circumstances changed; three of the women got divorced, one because it allowed her to manage her household independently, without her violent husband, and another as her husband wanted to control her income. The women’s programme





is also a safe space for women to express discretely any issues they might encounter: “Many of them know that they can tell me about their problems,” Al-Haswani explained. NGO cooperation enables her to refer cases, such as domestic violence, to other more resourceful NGOs in order to offer the refugees maximum support and possibly re-locate them away from their problems. The NGO’s primary goal is to encourage and empower Syrian youth and women, victimised by the conflict. Basmeh & Zeitooneh works to find opportunities for those affected by the conflict to develop their skills so that they may lead a life of dignity, even as a refugee.

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