



# Islamic Charities

in the Syrian Context  
in Jordan and Lebanon

Sarah Hasselbarth

FRIEDRICH  
EBERT   
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## 1 Introduction

Since the outbreak of the uprising against President Assad in February 2011, Syrians have been crossing the borders to their neighbouring countries – mainly Jordan and Lebanon – to seek refuge. By November 2013, over two million refugees had been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The official registration numbers of Syrians was over 500,000 in Jordan and over 700,000 in Lebanon, but both governments estimate the actual number to be more than one million.

Having left their homes, their belongings, and their social networks behind, refugees arrive in their host countries with no resources to support their families. In Jordan, the Zaatari refugee camp hosted around 160,000 refugees in August 2013. The majority of Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon, however, found accommodation in the local communities. Host communities have welcomed the refugees and shared their limited resources to an extent that deserves the greatest respect. But with the refugee crisis in its third year, resources are diminishing, the host communities are overstrained, and refugees are relying more than ever on humanitarian assistance programmes.

However, the humanitarian answer to the Syrian refugee crisis faces several challenges, the biggest of which is the lack of funding. The United Nations and its implementing partners launched the fifth revision of the Regional Response Plan in June 2013, which requested 3 billion US dollars in order to provide appropriate assistance for the refugees. This plan has only been funded 62% to date. The UN and its partners had to cut their distribution of food, hygiene, and baby kits.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, security restrictions negatively impact the humanitarian intervention – this is especially relevant for parts of Lebanon. In June 2013, UN agencies and partners had to suspend programmes for several days due to unrest in Bekaa, the North, and around Sidon. Through the permanent movement of refugees, it is difficult for UNHCR to keep track of refugees' residences and ensure their access to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.acaps.org/reports/downloader/part\\_ii\\_host\\_countries/49](http://www.acaps.org/reports/downloader/part_ii_host_countries/49), ACAPS Regional Analysis for Syria, Part II Host Countries July 2013, p. 1

asylum, timely registration, and distribution of assistance. A further limit to humanitarian assistance is that the UN is bound to certain restrictions when assisting refugees. These include, for example, that UN agencies do not assist combatants. However, in the Syrian crisis, it is common that active combatants cross the borders into neighbouring countries regularly to see their families, rest, collect money, or even recruit new comrades among young refugee men. In addition, there are refugees who choose not to register with UNHCR<sup>2</sup> and therefore have no access to UN-linked assistance, such as free access to education or health services in their host countries.

This gap in humanitarian assistance is being filled by Islamic charities and community-based organisations. Their procedures for humanitarian assistance programmes are simple and informal, and their assistance is easy to access – especially in villages or areas with security concerns. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, they have been receiving enormous funds from the Gulf countries, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafists so they can fill financial gaps. Most of these organisations operate through community centres, such as mosques.

Nevertheless, concern has been rising among both humanitarian actors and refugees that some of these charities not only offer humanitarian assistance, but also religious and political thought, or even make assistance dependent on the religion or political affiliation of refugees. This study investigates the extent to which these allegations are true. It presents a picture of the structures and strategies of intervention of Islamic charities, of collaboration between Islamic charities and the international humanitarian community, and finally of how refugees perceive the assistance of Islamic charities.

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<sup>2</sup> Reasons are primarily fear of giving personal data; others hope to cope without humanitarian assistance or are not aware of UNHCR.

## **2 Methodology**

The main resources of the study are qualitative interviews, complemented by an indicative survey. There are three groups of interviewees: Islamic charities, international NGOs, and UN agencies in both Jordan and Lebanon. Interviews with Islamic charities provided information about their humanitarian interventions and programmes, their access to refugees, their funding mechanism, and their role within the humanitarian community. To complement this picture, the author also spoke with UN agencies and international NGOs about how they perceive the intervention of community-based organisations and the cooperation with them.

In Jordan, it was also possible to interview refugees and conduct an indicative survey of about 70 interviews with Syrian refugees. The survey assessed whether Syrian refugees knew from which organisation they received assistance, if the assistance was based on certain conditions (such as religion, political affiliation, or origin in Syria) and if they were aware of that. However, these interviews have to be analysed carefully as many refugees would deny having received assistance, because they are afraid of secret service agents from Syria, or of being excluded from further assistance. The reason refugees were only interviewed in Jordan is because the author had access to them through a personal network of NGOs and was able to analyse the information given in the interviews in August 2013 in the context of her field experience between October 2012 and March 2013. Without being familiar with the situation in the field and having a relationship of trust with refugees, it is almost impossible to gain usable data. Therefore, the author decided against including the refugees' interviews in Lebanon.



## 3 Jordan

### 3.1 Islamic Charities in Jordan - Filling a Gap?

When the first Syrians entered Jordan, there were only a few international organisations present. The refugees found accommodation within the communities, many of them with relatives or friends. They were hosted in private homes or rented small rooms and apartments. Especially in the beginning, both Syrians and Jordanians thought that the refugees would not stay long and return back home, but it soon became clear that the refugees would remain. Prices for rent, food, and other items rose, and the host communities – located in one of Jordan’s poorest areas – were unable to absorb the huge numbers of Syrians crossing the border daily. The local community-based organisations first stepped in to provide humanitarian aid, by distributing cash for rent, food, and blankets.<sup>3</sup>

Transit camps like Abdallah Park and Cyber City were established only a short time later, with Zaatari camp following as the biggest refugee camp for Syrians in the region. With the camps and the increasing influx of refugees, more and more international agencies came to Jordan and started their humanitarian programmes. But this assistance immediately focused on Zaatari: “All of the international agencies focused on Zaatari for the first year and a half because of the sheer magnitude of that camp. Little has been directed to the host communities.”<sup>4</sup> Therewith, the attention of politicians, celebrities, and media was centred on the newly established camp and the funds of governments and private donations were channelled into the camp. Zaatari brought more devastating stories and better pictures than the refugees in host communities. The camp – known to the whole world in the news – became the synonym for Syrian refugees in Jordan, while in fact most refugees began to settle in the communities around Zaatari, thus marginalised in the humanitarian intervention. Only a few international organisations were covering their needs, and the gap that was left by international agencies in the host communities was primarily filled by the local Islamic charities that are present in every village.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with UNHCR, August 2013

<sup>4</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

A year later, the vast majority of refugees live in the host communities, and humanitarian intervention programmes widely include assistance for urban refugees. Coordination meetings in Amman and in the north facilitate the assistance and ensure that UNHCR and its implementing partners cover all areas and sectors. Yet, the community-based organisations still fill a special gap within this framework: most of the international NGOs as well as the UN have their country offices in Amman, and some of them have started to open field offices in Mafraq or Irbid. Humanitarian aid workers reside in the capital and primarily coordinate their projects from there, occasionally visiting the field. The community-based organisations, however, are based within the communities. Every village has at least one *zakat* committee, which is linked to a mosque. This committee is responsible for collecting the *zakat* – a tribute that every Muslim has to donate once a year according to Islam. The system will be explained below.

These community-based organisations follow a bottom-up approach: they are placed in the middle of the society, and are in a better position to understand the needs and challenges both refugees and Jordanians are facing.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, due to their presence in almost every village, they are able to reach the most vulnerable: the most marginalised areas are largely where the most vulnerable refugees settle down, unable to reach to the international organisations in the bigger towns, and dependent on humanitarian workers to find them.

In addition to the *zakat* committees, which are also funded by private donations, there are other community-based organisations operating in several communities. The two most well known are al-Kitab wal-Sunna, a network affiliated with the Salafists, and al-Markaz al-Islami (The Islamic Center Charity Society / Jam'iyat al-Markaz al-Islami al-Khayriya), which belongs to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Both have community-based organisations in the three largest towns in northern Jordan – Irbid, Ramtha, and Mafraq – where they provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees. With the growing refugee crisis, their funding has increased as well: a considerable amount of money has been transferred from the Gulf region since the outbreak of the Syria crisis in the past year.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with INGOs, August 2013

## 3.2 The Approach of Islamic Charities

The two big charities – al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami – dominate the Islamic charity scene in Jordan. Their names are known to everyone working in the field, but neither their programmes nor their structure are clear to most of the international NGOs. In addition to these two charities, there are also the local *zakat* committees and community-based organisations, which are widespread and cover the urgent needs of the communities. The work of both, the two big charities as well as the local charities, will be highlighted in this chapter in terms of their programmes, their strategies, and their funding, in order to give a clear picture about the differences in their work and their images, as well as their common mechanisms.

### 3.2.1 *Community-based Organisations and Zakat Committees*

As mentioned above, the *zakat* committees are present in every village. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam and builds the fundament of charity in Islamic context. The *zakat* is a tax that every Muslim has to pay once a year, usually during Ramadan. These taxes are paid to the *zakat* committees of every village and then distributed to the poorest members of the community. Moreover, this principle includes the sharing of food with poor people. Rich businessmen or private individuals pay such fees throughout the year on a voluntary basis. The committees organise themselves on a local level and are not usually linked to any bigger network. In addition to these committees, there are other local community-based organisations active in some places. A *zakat* committee in Kufr Yuba (a village next to Irbid) and a Quran school in Wadi Kunfranji (a village close to Ajloun) are two of many examples.

The funding of the two associations is underlying exactly these mechanisms explained above. Their basic funding is coming from Jordanians, mostly private donations on a monthly basis. But with the huge influx of refugees, they also receive additional money from Gulf countries. It is charities or rich people who want to support their brothers in faith or do have familiar links to villages in Jordan or refugee families. The general *zakat* committees, such as the one in Kufr Yuba, are bound to certain structures.

The government, namely the Ministry of Awqaf,<sup>6</sup> controls all of the *zakat* committees throughout the country. It audits the funding and spending of the money. The money they spend is collected in a box in the mosque or collected in the community by members of the committee.<sup>7</sup> If the *zakat* committee wants to spend that money, three people have to sign the request: the chair of committee, the vice chair, and the finance officer. Every six months, the ministry reviews the finances of each committee.<sup>8</sup> The ministry also confirms new employees. To hire a new colleague, a *zakat* committee has to submit an application to the Awqaf department of the respective governorate, which is then forwarded to the ministry. The ministry then consults with police forces and Jordanian intelligence services before approving the candidate. This procedure shows that the government retains strict control over *zakat* committees. Furthermore, they control operations, employees, and even the content of the Friday prayers. These mechanisms allow the government to keep track not only of personnel issues, but also of religious developments.

### 3.2.2 *Al-Kitab wal-Sunna*

*Al-Kitab wal-Sunna* has a head office in Amman and eight local offices across the country.<sup>9</sup> The coordination of donors and distribution of aid is mainly handled by the head office under the lead of Sheikh Zaid Ibrahim Hammad, and then forwarded to the field offices. The educational services that they also provide are planned in the field offices, but still closely coordinated with Amman. Most of their donations come from Jordanians, as well as from *zakat* collections and private donors. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, private donors or community-based organisations from the Gulf Region have also increased their support. However, after immense

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<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Jordan is responsible for all matters related to Islam; this includes the work of Islamic foundations and *zakat* committees.

<sup>7</sup> According to the committee, about one-third of the money is collected through boxes and two-thirds through private donations.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with *zakat* committee in Kufr Yuba, August 2013

<sup>9</sup> In the beginning of the refugee crisis, *al-Kitab wal-Sunna* was operating only three offices in Ramtha, Mafraq, and Amman. In the last year, they opened new branches in Irbid, Zarqa, Saife, Maan, and Aqaba. For their activities in Zaatar camp see footnote 13.

funding during 2012, funding decreased throughout 2013,<sup>10</sup> which has been confirmed by the international community. Several international NGOs and UNHCR have also witnessed the rise and fall of financial support since the beginning of the refugee crisis.

The main component of al-Kitab wal-Sunna's programmes is the distribution of basic relief items such as food and non-food items. As of August 2013, the office in Ramtha had reached over 5,541 households, while the office in Irbid assisted 7,114 households. The procedures are simple: refugees learn about their activities from relatives and neighbours, approach their help desks, and register their names for assistance. When the organisation carries out a round of distribution, they call the refugees to come and pick up their goods. For their humanitarian intervention, they do have certain criteria: Al-Kitab wal-Sunna claims that they only assist refugees who either have a UNHCR registration card or a bail-out certificate that confirms their legal exit from Zaatari camp.<sup>11</sup> In Ramtha, al-Kitab wal-Sunna cooperates closely with al-Markaz al-Islami and another local community-based organisation called al-Takaful. They coordinate their assistance through a service card on which they mark exactly what the refugees received from whom. Their beneficiaries are primarily female-headed households, disabled people, and referrals. A special focus is placed on families of martyrs (*shuhada'*), who were killed in the Syrian crisis. In Ramtha, al-Kitab wal-Sunna recently bought three buildings where they host widows and children of fighters against the Assad regime.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2.3 *Al-Markaz al-Islami*

In contrast to al-Kitab wal-Sunna, whose name and activities have been rising with the Syrian crisis, al-Markaz al-Islami has been operating in Jordan for many years, with currently more than 50 offices across the kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with al-Kitab wal-Sunna in Ramtha and Irbid, August 2013

<sup>11</sup> However one refugee family stated that they could not be assisted because they crossed the border legally and al-Kitab wal-Sunna would only help people who "ran away" from the camp. This contradiction raises a point that is dealt with later: through unclear procedures refugees get the impression of corruption and favouritism.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with al-Kitab wal-Sunna, August 2013

It has its own branches and its own community-based organisations. They are affiliated with the Islamic Center Charitable Society,<sup>13</sup> but still have some degree of autonomy to run their own fundraising and distribution of humanitarian assistance and development assistance.<sup>14</sup> The donation mechanism for al-Markaz al-Islami is also based on the *zakat* system. Most of the money they receive comes from Jordanians, as private donations on a monthly basis.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, al-Markaz al-Islami administers an annual budget of around 34 million Jordanian Dinar,<sup>16</sup> which means that it is a huge organisation with a proper administrative system in place.<sup>17</sup> This shows that these private donations are not collected on a random basis but are part of a professional system. Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, people and charities from the Gulf have also supported their work. And al-Markaz al-Islami is expanding. In 2012, the head of al-Markaz al-Islami in Ajloun announced that they had received large donations about two to three times a month, and in summer 2013, about four to five times per month. Moreover, the donors decide for what and whom the money should be allocated. Some donors even participate in the distribution: “Today we had a distribution by a man from Kuwait who came himself. He called us in advance and said ‘I want one hundred Syrian families to be there to distribute money.’”<sup>18</sup>

Like al-Kitab wal-Sunna, al-Markaz al-Islami distributes mainly basic relief items – food and non-food items such as refrigerators, fans, clothes, and cash. Also the registration and distribution procedures are similar: people come to the offices and register in order to receive the assistance. A main criterion for al-Markaz al-Islami is the arrival date of the refugees, according to the office in Ajloun; al-Markaz al-Islami assists primarily new arrivals. In addition to their humanitarian assistance, they also offer educational classes.

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<sup>13</sup> ICCS = al-Markaz al-Islami

<sup>14</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

<sup>15</sup> Interview with al-Markaz al-Islami, August 2013

<sup>16</sup> About 48 million USD; Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

<sup>17</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

<sup>18</sup> Interview with al-Markaz al-Islami, August 2013

### 3.2.4 *Educational Programmes*

Apart from their relief programmes, the community-based organisations also run religious courses for Syrians. This is nothing new. Local committees and Quran schools give religious classes, just as churches do in Europe. Nevertheless, the educational programmes warrant a separate investigation. Both international organisations and Syrian democratic forces are concerned that certain groups among the Islamic charities use educational programmes to spread their own Islamic or political agenda. Salafist movements and the Muslim Brotherhood gain influence across the region due to the Syrian crisis, and anxiety is rising that these Quran lessons are more than just ordinary religious education, and that they have a long-term impact on the refugees' religious and political thinking in a way that does not comply with international human rights.

Refugees receive a set amount of money for attending these courses – al-Kitab wal-Sunna in Ramtha pays about 200 JD<sup>19</sup> for a fully attended course. Given the assertion by all community-based organisations that Syrians are far less religiously educated than their (more conservative) Jordanian host community, this raises a particular concern among the international community: even if money is the motivating factor in the beginning, some attendees may develop interest in the Quran sessions and want to pursue the topic in more depth. It should not be forgotten that for refugees who have lost everything, religion often takes on a more important role in daily life; and when they go to their teachers to explore topics in more detail and discuss religious issues, their conversation partners are not always moderate or conservative Muslims, but Salafists who spread their own interpretation of Islam.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The equivalent of about 208,- EUR

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2013/08/islamic-charities-jordan> (last accessed on 16 September 2013)

All community-based organisations that were interviewed for this study generally follow the same mechanisms and underlie similar structures: they work according to the Islamic principle of charity, distributing basic relief items for the neediest people; they are mainly funded through private donations from the rich (primarily Jordanians); they work from community centres that are usually linked to a mosque. Since the influx of Syrian refugees, they have expanded their programmes and received additional funding from the Gulf states. All of them also offer Quran classes, however, it is beyond the scope of this study to look at what the different organisations are teaching. The difference between them is the extent of government control that the *zakat* committees experience. While the *zakat* committees have to show the Ministry of Awqaf proof of their employees' qualifications, their financing, and even their religious messages, the two networks of the Salafists and Muslim Brotherhood hire their personnel independently and organise their work much more informally.

### **3.3 Islamic Charities and the Humanitarian Community**

#### *3.3.1 Levels of Cooperation*

Cooperation between Islamic charities and international organisations occurs on different levels: formal partnerships; informal cooperation between UN agencies and head offices in Amman; and occasional cooperation between an international NGO and a charity organisation in the field. However, informal and occasional partnerships dominate due to the different systems of the respective organisations.

UNICEF has a formal partnership with al-Markaz al-Islami to provide non-formal education for children and psychosocial activities. As a country office of a UN institution, they look for partners who are able to operate on national level, who have outreach to all areas – or can at least cover one governorate. Reasons for this are mainly bureaucratic. Therefore, going into partnership with smaller community-based organisations is not an option. Nevertheless, they encourage local organisations to collaborate so that they can act with a bigger capacity. UNICEF has more such partnerships with the Jordanian Women's Union and the Noor al-Hussein Foundation, who themselves partner with several small entities.



As such a partner, al-Markaz al-Islami had to sign agreements with UNICEF and adhere to certain conditions, such as child protection. Like any other organisation that partners with UNICEF, al-Markaz al-Islami had to undergo a procedure before signing an agreement: UNICEF conducted an assessment of the organisation's systems through an external audit firm. Such an assessment covers financial-, procurement-, and programme-related internal work process and rules. This external firm categorised the organisation on a risk scale in all of these categories and examined whether the organisation was affiliated with any militant groups or activities that represent a violation of human rights (such as child labour and sexual abuse).<sup>21</sup> Religious background is not an excluding factor – this also applies for Christian organisations such as World Vision. Having passed this assessment, al-Markaz al-Islami and UNICEF have been partners since 1996. Nonetheless, it took about four years to reach a relationship of trust on both sides: “When I see some of their staff speaking, it's really a developmental agenda that they are speaking about; and they are opening up to other ideas rather than just distributing parcels and focusing on philanthropic activities. They are now talking about life skills for adolescents, about parental education, and the role of men in children's lives.”<sup>22</sup> But UNICEF also profited from that collaboration: “The majority of the organisations we work with struggle to reach the hardest to reach. Al-Markaz al-Islami however, is very easily reaching those hardest to reach individuals, like households headed by single females, children without parental care, etc.”<sup>23</sup> UNICEF is the only UN institution and international organisation that claims to have such a partnership in Jordan. Although a partnership like this brings with it huge potential for cooperation, many international organisations – and even UN institutions in Jordan – remain sceptical. They emphasise that given the fragmentary information available about an Islamic organisation like al-Markaz al-Islami, one should be aware that they are also following another – political or religious – agenda that they do not reveal to international partners.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

<sup>22</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

<sup>23</sup> Interview with UNICEF, August 2013

Informal cooperation rather than a formal partnership exists between UNHCR and al-Kitab wal-Sunna, as they both see in it the potential to improve the situation of the refugees. Both organisations know what the other side is able to provide for refugees and what the capacities are, and they exchange information on an individual rather than on an organisational level.<sup>24</sup> UNHCR is not the only international humanitarian actor working in this manner. The international NGOs, in particular, cooperate informally with Islamic charities – primarily on the field level with the smaller, local community-based organisations such as the *zakat* committee in Kufri Yuba. As for the organisations interviewed for this study, all of them collaborate with local community-based organisations or NGOs. This mainly included referrals of refugees to each other for specific needs, operating small programmes, providing their premises as distribution points, or identifying refugees in their neighbourhoods.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, this cooperation often does not happen on an equal level, as confirmed by an employee of an international NGO. To a certain extent, it seems that international organisations prefer informal cooperation, and usually do not even mention the local partners in their reports. Thus, they do not have to explain to their donors who these community-based organisations are, how they work, and where they get their money. The international NGOs asked about this information were unable to provide an answer.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.3.2 *Challenges in Coordination and Cooperation*

Apart from occasional cooperation, there is no coordination in a wider sense. The local community-based organisations are not reflected in the Regional Response Plan<sup>27</sup> – the overall humanitarian framework – and although al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami are, they rarely attend coordination meetings. This cannot be blamed entirely on them. It is also the responsibility of the international community to include the charities in the coordination mechanisms. The meetings typically take place in Amman where only al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with UNHCR, August 2013

<sup>25</sup> Interview with INGOs, August 2013

<sup>26</sup> Confirmed in an interview with an INGO, August 2013

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/50d192fd9.html> (last accessed on 17. December 2013)

have premises. Moreover, the language of the coordination meetings is English and so are the common databases. Even in the two big charities, there is almost no one who speaks English well enough to participate in these meetings and understand their agendas. In effect, the tools used by the humanitarian community exclude the community-based organisations. It is almost impossible for the charities to keep track of the procedures or even to understand the mechanisms without proper training – both in English and in terms of technical know-how – and this type of training happens only to a very limited extent. “I can tell you that these charities, together with the local NGOs, were not provided with the training or not invited, and no time and money was invested in them. On the other hand, I don’t think they value or they understand the importance of coordination and cooperation with other NGOs – especially the international ones.”<sup>28</sup> These kinds of attempts were largely made in Amman and by the UNHCR. But those were trainings on protection, codes of conduct, and human rights. What these community-based organisations need are trainings on operations, management, coordination – and most important for coordination, language.<sup>29</sup>

Most charities claim that they would appreciate more support from international organisations in order to benefit from their experience and capacities. They see their own limits, as well as the opportunities to improve and extend their programmes through cooperation with UN agencies and international NGOs. But they get the impression that many international agencies think that they work based on religious motives and that they do not assist refugees equally.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes they even feel exploited: international NGOs approach them, asking for names, databases, and assistance with distributions on local levels. However, most of these organisations don’t value their contribution. A conversation partner from an international NGO confirms that: “I don’t think they (community-based organisations) are seen, honestly. I don’t think they are seen, as they should be – as equals. They are not seen as partners. They are seen maybe as an implementing

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with INGO, August 2013

<sup>29</sup> Interview with UNHCR, August 2013

<sup>30</sup> Interview with al-Markaz al-Islami, August 2013

partner from the backdoor.”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, there are voices stating the opposite. Al-Kitab wal-Sunna, in particular, points out complications in a possible cooperation: different organisations have different criteria that they use to decide whom to assist – they even face that problem in their common strategy with al-Markaz al-Islami and al-Takaful in Ramtha. It is easier for al-Kitab wal-Sunna to follow their own criteria and to launch their own programmes than to go through different procedures to gain common criteria, which would be time consuming and hinder them in the distribution of assistance.<sup>32</sup>

But who could take a lead in improving the capacities of the Islamic charities? Some international NGOs started capacity building – on certain skills that are needed for common projects – for local partners by themselves. A smart approach has been taken by UNHCR: if it is a serious requirement for the humanitarian community to take the community-based organisations on board, they must be trained on a professional level, probably by an organisation with a development focus. It must be a long-term goal and – most of all – provide the local charities with skills that enable them to assist refugees and people in need on a professional and more efficient level. However, Islamic charities have to agree to such training. Some stated that they would appreciate more training and the opportunity to develop their work to a more professional one. But the Islamic charities work on a completely different approach than international organisations, and they see the system of humanitarian agencies in the field as obstacles to their work. Adhering to international humanitarian principles would mean weakening their own – Islamic – principles, a system that has been in place for centuries.

This difference is perceived as the biggest obstacle to formal cooperation by international organisations. The latter provide humanitarian aid according to international humanitarian principles; they have objective criteria for their interventions and are obliged to maintaining a high level of transparency

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with INGO, August 2013

<sup>32</sup> Interview with al-Kitab wal-Sunna, August 2013

towards their donors and to monitor and evaluate their activities. This applies especially for programmes such as child protection, health, water, and sanitation, but also for distribution mechanisms for non-food items and selection criteria regarding the beneficiaries. The community-based organisations approach their humanitarian interventions on a completely different level. They don't refer to the same objective humanitarian criteria as international organisations, but assist on the basis of their own – Islamic – principles. One of these principles is martyrdom, a criterion that is highly problematic for humanitarian actors. As mentioned earlier, families of men who were killed in the war in Syria receive special attention and assistance by Islamic charities. This criterion however, is unacceptable for international humanitarian actors for whom neutrality towards any war is among the four fundamental humanitarian principles, complemented by humanity, impartiality, and independence. On the basis of this idea of Islamic charity work, the organisational set-up is completely different. "They do not know how to set up a participatory and transparent system to work at such a large scale and most importantly, they rely on networks rather than mechanism and criteria. So, they use individuals rather than objective ways of delivering assistance. (...) The problem, though, is that a lot of the community-based organisations do not work based on the idea of it being work, but on the idea of it being charity, and that's very different because in that sense they are doing it completely right."<sup>33</sup>

At the foundation of community-based organisations' work are communities and mosques, and the people running the assistance are community leaders and Imams. Community-based organisations do not apply mechanisms like post-distribution monitoring or transparency, which is particularly important for international organisations. Transparency is what donors require and what makes cooperation with the community-based organisations quite difficult. "We have to be very strict with transparency, accountability. Essentially, we have to believe that a charity meets our minimum requirements for this type of thing; and certain elements of trust,"<sup>34</sup> stated an employee of an

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with UNHCR, August 2013

<sup>34</sup> Interview with INGO, August 2013

international NGO. Although transparency and accountability remain the big obstacles, the charities excel in best practices with regard to monitoring who received their assistance in order to avoid duplication. With the influx of the Syrian refugees, they indeed became more organised, especially under the lead of the Salafists.<sup>35</sup> They realised that without a monitoring system they would lose track of their beneficiaries. The Syrian crisis demands new standards from all the actors working with refugees.

There is a concern among humanitarian actors that with the growth and the professionalization of the community-based organisations, their political or religious agenda will play an increasingly important role as well. At this point, it seems impossible to measure the extent to which the community-based organisations influence the refugees' religious or political thinking. In participatory assessments and protection interviews by UNHCR, however, people have clearly stated that their behaviour has changed because of the religious demands of community-based organisations. This leads to the question of where the charities get their money. Who is behind the huge networks of al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami? There might be simple and unspectacular answers, but due to the lack of transparency, the two charities leave the international community speculating: "For pure domestic dynamics, I cannot even imagine that there is not a distinctive donor behind the charity. There has to be, because otherwise it doesn't even get into the country, given the configuration. If you look at the situation in Jordan, how they're set up respectively, how can it not be?"<sup>36</sup> A look at the annual budget of al-Markaz al-Islami of about 34 million JD might confirm this assumption.

But apart from that concern and the different approaches to their work, actors in the international community do appreciate the role of the charities: "They have the on-the-ground experience that the international organisations are lacking, and they have the community ties; but you also have to be careful when you say community ties, because there is this *wasta*<sup>37</sup> element."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with UN and INGO, August 2013

<sup>37</sup> "*Wasta*" is an Arabic term to describe favouritism.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with INGO, August 2013

Their establishment in the community and the easy access to the refugees is what humanitarians appreciate about the Islamic charities, and where they see potential for a future cooperation.

### **3.4 Perception of Islamic Charities by the Refugees**

After analysing the approach of Islamic charities as well as their relationship to other humanitarian actors in the field, it is interesting to analyse their relationship to refugees. How does the first contact happen? How do the Syrians perceive the charities? The evaluation of the answers and statements from the refugees has to be done carefully, because many Syrians showed fear during the interviews. Issues related to religion are extremely sensitive in the Syrian context, because refugees immediately fear being spied upon by the different Syrian war parties. As a consequence, they are hesitant with their answers. In addition, refugees link home visits and questionnaires with upcoming new assistance programmes. They avoid giving a clear picture about assistance received so far in order to be included in more programmes. All of this has to be kept in mind when analysing the interviews. Similar experiences have been made by many international agencies operating in the Syrian Refugee Response.

A first question is whether the refugees are aware of the fact that the assistance has arrived to them through Islamic charities. In an indicative survey,<sup>39</sup> 71 refugees – living in the three towns Irbid, Ramtha and Mafraq – were asked whether they knew from whom they received their assistance. Out of the 71 refugees 97% stated that they knew who assisted them, only 3% claimed not to know. All of them were beneficiaries of an international NGO. But when asked what kind of organisations assisted them, only 42% in Mafraq admitted to having received assistance by an international NGO, 41% in Irbid, and in Ramtha it was 19%. This illustrates two things: either the Syrians have lost track of the humanitarian actors in the field, and in fact do not really care who is assisting them as long as they get their family through the month; or they assume that with the indicative survey there

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<sup>39</sup> The survey was conducted by phone call and through Jordanians not representing any organisation.

might be options of more assistance coming along. It is common knowledge among refugees that being assisted by an international NGO makes it more likely to be refused by another international NGO, because they try to avoid duplications in their programmes in order to reach as many households as possible, whereas assistance by Islamic charities is not an excluding criterion. This is because Islamic charities mainly do a one-off distribution for the new arrivals, while the programmes of international NGOs are sustainable and serve the refugees over a longer term, and international NGOs know that. Hence, the less assistance the refugees admit to having received from an international NGO, the higher the chances are that they will be part of a new round of distribution. It is not clear what is more probable, most likely both factors play a role. However, the survey indicates that refugees might care less about who is behind the assistance than we might assume.

But it also shows that refugees have learned how to behave to be included in humanitarian programmes. This leads back to a point discussed earlier. Knowing that Islamic charities distribute money at the end of Quran classes could encourage an interest in these sessions. Hearing rumours that these charities favour pious brothers and sisters with basic relief items might lead to more visits to the mosque or a more pious behaviour in public than they used to have back in Syria. A refugee confirms that: she heard from other women about Quran classes in a village near Ajloun. It lasted one week and at the end she received 50 JD. The reason she went there was the money. After that, they never called her again but she admitted that she would have gone again if she had received more money.<sup>40</sup> This might not be a general phenomenon among refugees, but it is something that is happening and that one should be mindful of.

In general, the Syrians are well aware of the humanitarian assistance procedures and how they are treated by the humanitarian organisations – whether international agencies or local charities. As for the Islamic charities, there is a lot of criticism about their work: “If they like you, they help you, if they don’t like you, they don’t assist you.”<sup>41</sup> It is the impression among refugees that assistance is handed out arbitrarily with favouring of relatives

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Syrian refugees, August 2013



or neighbours by (especially Syrian) volunteers. Many families stated that some received assistance more than once, while others haven't received anything at all. Because they don't see a system behind these procedures – no criteria, no transparency – many refugees have begun to mistrust these charities. Rumours circulate among the refugees that volunteers keep half of the goods they distribute (such as food parcels) for themselves. One criterion that some women realised, however, is the martyrdom of their husbands. There is an example of a woman who approached both al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami several times, telling them of the death of her husband and that she is the head of household now. But because she didn't have a death certificate the assistance was refused to her.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the refugees realised that the community-based organisations prioritise new arrivals. People who just crossed the border into Jordan receive a one-off assistance and are never contacted again. Families who have been residing in Jordan for months and years now feel discriminated against.

It is the international NGOs that they trust most. This finding was confirmed in the qualitative interviews. The reasons given were predominantly the system they perceived behind the actions of international NGOs, justice in the selection of beneficiaries, and the way they were treated by employees of international NGOs.

Although there is a certain sense of corruption and favouritism with regard to the Islamic charities, the majority (96%) of the refugees interviewed stated that there are no conditions such as religious or political affiliation for assistance by the charities, which was again confirmed in the qualitative interviews. None of the refugees asked have ever been approached by any Islamic charities for religious purposes. Some, however, heard that it has happened to neighbours or relatives. Some stated that a selection criterion was the martyrdom of the husband in Syria. Others mentioned that there were no conditions for receiving humanitarian assistance; however, they talked to them about the Quran courses when they went to the distribution points to receive their parcels and that the children who attend the school receive money.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Summarising the refugee's attitude towards the Islamic charities in Jordan, one could say that most distrust the fairness of their procedures and consider the capacities of international NGOs and the UN to be more extensive. However, this distrust is primarily linked to the lack of transparency in the Islamic charities' working methods and the impression of favouritism towards certain families. No refugee paid too much attention to the charities' religious or political motives. They realised that some community-based organisations might have an agenda but do not feel bothered by them. Instead, it seems that they learn what these community-based organisations want to see and behave like that in order to receive as much assistance as possible. The implications for this will be evaluated in the conclusion.

## **4 Lebanon**

### **4.1 Islamic Charities as Part of an Active Civil Society**

Turning to Lebanon, the situation of the Syrian refugees and the humanitarian response looks similar at first glance. However, there is one big difference, which also reflects the appearance of the Islamic charities. In contrary to Jordan, the political system in Lebanon has always been fragile. The division of the country into ethnic and religious groups is mirrored in the balance of power of government and parliament. Throughout the history of Lebanon, the Lebanese have repeatedly experienced the incapability of the often-divided governments to guarantee the functioning of state structures. This led to a very active civil society. Whenever the Lebanese government was not able to fulfil the responsibilities of a state towards its citizens, the strong civil society groups took over. Essential parts of this civil society have always been Islamic charities.

When the first Syrian refugees came to Lebanon, Islamic charities immediately jumped in to distribute relief items. In the beginning, there were only a few refugees and the Islamic charities were able to maintain an overview. They went out to assist the ones in need. They mainly worked on the local level, each one focusing on their respective neighbourhoods. As refugees spread from Wadi Khaled all over the North, especially settling in Akkar and Tripoli, the charities quickly realised that the number of refugees was exceeding their capacities. Instead of them going out into the neighbourhoods, refugees would approach the charities to ask for assistance and the charities were unable to keep track. It was at this point that the charities came together to create a crisis unit. The first coalition of this kind, called Ittilaf (coalition), was established in the city of Akkar. Through a common database and coordination mechanisms, the coalition was able to reach more areas and more refugees and to coordinate different aid programmes. Regular meetings took place to make sure that every neighbourhood and area was being covered with the different relief items.

As opposed to Jordan, the charities were not the only organisations present from the very beginning. According to UNHCR, the government

also immediately activated all resources to assist the refugees through its High Relief Committee, together with UN agencies. Even so, UNHCR confirms that the charities were very active from point zero.<sup>43</sup> They were especially able to assist those who were not covered by the UN and its implementing partners. This includes people who were not yet registered with UNHCR, Lebanese returnees, or those who regularly travel between Syria and Lebanon. But it also included programmes like special medical treatments that are not provided by the international community, or simply additional relief items where there is need. It was certainly the joint effort of the international community and national resources that enabled them to assist as many people in need as possible from the very beginning. Neither system would have had the capacity to carry out this humanitarian response on its own. Refugees were too many, and funds – also from Western and Gulf donors – did not cover the needs by far.

When the crisis continued to increase and refugees started to disperse across the country, the charities took the lead in responding to the new dimensions. This was possible simply because they were traditionally present in every village. The government and international agencies had focused all of their efforts on the North and the Bekaa Valley, and it took them a while to adjust to the new situation – especially in light of bureaucratic procedures.<sup>44</sup> Due to their local presence, the charities were immediately able to spread their assistance.

With the expansion of assistance to refugees all over the country, another crisis unit was created. This unit, which is called Ittihad (union), is based in Beirut and currently covers all areas of Lebanon. Apart from the two unions, the highest religious authority in Lebanon, Dar al-Fatwa, is coordinating local charities. The interplay between the three networks is highly interesting: All three associations work on the basis of Islamic charity principles and through local charities. Therefore, Ittilaf and Ittihad should theoretically be coordinated through Dar al-Fatwa as the umbrella for Islamic charities in Lebanon. However, this is an assumption by some international organisations<sup>45</sup> neither agreed on by the unions nor by Dar

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>44</sup> Interview with UN and INGOs, October 2013

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

al-Fatwa itself. How these networks function, how they are embedded in the overall humanitarian response, and again how refugees perceive their role will be investigated in the following sections. There is one difference in comparison with the Jordan section, which consists of the interview partners of Islamic charities. While the partners in Jordan were mainly representatives of local offices, the interviews in Lebanon took place on central level at the head offices. Although this might be difficult to compare, it is seen as a complementary approach. The actual work and approach of the local offices is very similar in both countries. After presenting the fieldwork using the example of Jordan, the research in Lebanon illuminates structures on a central level. This might be even more relevant as it picks up the unique political and social landscape in Lebanon.

## **4.2 The Networks of Islamic Charities across Lebanon**

It is surprising how unclear the roles of Islamic charities, their set-ups, and their networks are to so many key actors in the humanitarian response in Lebanon. The UN, international NGOs, think tanks, and charity networks contradict each other in their descriptions. This may be tied not only to confusing roles and unclear systems, but also in part to power struggles and official lines.

### *4.2.1 Dar al-Fatwa*

Dar al-Fatwa is the supreme religious authority in Lebanon. The body of Dar al-Fatwa responsible for relief work is the Association of Relief and Humanitarian Aid. Basically, it is the umbrella association for all local Islamic charities in Lebanon. This association has many years of experience in the country, as it has been present in Lebanon and operating relief work long before the Syrian crisis affected the country. Their relief work includes educational and medical services and orphanages, but also publishing a newspaper and running a radio station. Although they have extensive experience, the head of the association emphasised that the dimensions of the Syrian refugee crisis are overwhelming Dar al-Fatwa. As a result, they realised in the past two years the need to improve and professionalise their work in order to meet the needs of the people in the country – both Syrians

and Lebanese.<sup>46</sup> In this context, Dar al-Fatwa has built a common database for its member charities working in the area of Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and they are working to build the same for their field associations in Akkar, Bekaa, and the North.<sup>47</sup>

The funding for the charities under Dar al-Fatwa in Lebanon goes through two different channels based on the *zakat* system.<sup>48</sup> Either Dar al-Fatwa receives the money from the donors and then distributes it throughout the charity network, or funding is given directly to the local charities,<sup>49</sup> in which case, Dar al-Fatwa has no proper control over the expenditure of this money. This is a phenomenon taking place in Tripoli: decreasing Dar al-Fatwa's control of local charities in Tripoli makes those charities independent.<sup>50</sup> In Tripoli, this increases the risk of advances by the Salafists or the Muslim Brotherhood. This mechanism reflects the situation of state institutions: in principle, they have authority and clear responsibilities, but on the ground they are often not able to keep track with actual developments.

The Grand Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon leads the religious authority. Any decision about religious approaches and procedures in the country falls to him – a hierarchic structure that means that any other union either has to submit to his authority or to find a way to work independently. This leads to the complicated relationship between Dar al-Fatwa and Ittihad and Ittilaf, because they don't accept the Grand Mufti's authority. Yet, it is unclear what the exact link to the two unions looks like. The Association of Relief and Humanitarian Aid sees itself as a purely humanitarian body that provides humanitarian assistance to those in need – independent of religious, political, or any other affiliation. The other two unions are perceived by Dar al-Fatwa as charity arms of organisations with political affiliations and can therefore not work under their umbrella. Ittihad sees that similarly, but frames it differently as described below. In contrast to this, it is the general

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Dar al-Fatwa, November 2013

<sup>47</sup> Brochure of Dar al-Fatwa

<sup>48</sup> See p. 6 (Jordan section)

<sup>49</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>50</sup> Interview with UN and INGOs, October 2013

impression of the UN agencies and international NGOs, which are aware of these unions, that Dar al-Fatwa initiated both Ittilaf in Akkar/Tripoli and Ittihad in Beirut; that both unions work under the umbrella of Dar al-Fatwa, sharing a common database, receiving money from the authority, and being represented by them in general meetings.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.2.2 *Ittilaf*

Dar al-Fatwa existed before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. However, when the crisis began, charities in the North combined their resources and founded a new coalition, the Ittilaf.<sup>52</sup> It is not yet clear why this coalition – and later for the same reason Ittihad – was founded in addition to Dar al-Fatwa, instead of working under their umbrella, as Islamic charities would do traditionally. Dar al-Fatwa's assertion that Ittilaf is a political association could be an explanation, giving the work of Ittilaf (and Ittihad) a political dimension and therefore making cooperation impossible. Another reason could lie in the capacities of Dar al-Fatwa. As they confirmed above, they were overwhelmed with the huge influx of refugees and according to Ittihad, they would only operate a common database in the area of Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon; that database was established months after refugees settled in the North. So it seems more plausible that the lack of coordination through Dar al-Fatwa in the beginning led to the establishment of Ittilaf in the North.

Ittilaf consists of about 20 associations. They share a common database and exchange information about their interventions. By combining their knowledge and different programmes, they can reach more refugees with more humanitarian assistance. The intervention of the single charities follows the same concept, which has been described for the case in Jordan: funded through *zakat* and donations from the Gulf, the charities distribute humanitarian assistance based on the traditions of Islamic charity. When the refugees began to spread across Lebanon, charities across the country got together to extend Ittilaf. However, Ittilaf refused to expand their network

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Ittihad, November 2013

throughout Lebanon and another union was founded: Ittihad.<sup>53</sup> Initially, Ittilaf was part of Ittihad, sharing a database and coordinating closely. This cooperation has ended. Both unions are now working separately, with Ittilaf covering the North around Akkar, Wadi Khaled, and Tripoli. A reason for this split was not provided.

According to some, Ittilaf is affiliated with Salafist movements.<sup>54</sup> Although most of the interview partners agree on the strong presence of Salafist groups in the union, it does not seem clear whether these groups took a lead in the founding of Ittilaf, and the extent to which they dominate the union in terms of religious influence – e.g., beneficiaries or programming. UNHCR states that the Ittilaf charities cannot be officially under the umbrella of Salafists, because Ittilaf must be under the umbrella of Dar al-Fatwa, as the highest religious authority.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Ittilaf is seen by Dar al-Fatwa as political association as discussed above.<sup>56</sup> Combining this statement by Dar al-Fatwa with other opinions about the Salafist influence of Ittilaf in Tripoli,<sup>57</sup> it seems more than likely that Salafist groups dominate Ittilaf, if not even lead it. UNHCR sees that in Tripoli, for example, the Salafist groups became stronger during the refugee crisis and might have taken over internal control or at least influence internal structures and procedures.<sup>58</sup> A reason for the growing influence is the deteriorating security situation around Tripoli. Fewer associations deliver aid alone to that area, and work through the charities there. Local charities become more independent and implement their own agenda: “In a way they (Ittilaf) are independent, they work separately, they have their own programmes, and nothing shows that they report to Beirut. They show themselves as independent.”<sup>59</sup> It must be emphasised however, that non-Salafist groups are also part of the Ittilaf. Whoever might lead Ittilaf, associations of other beliefs and secular groups are free to join.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> This view is shared by the International Crisis Group (interview in October 2013).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Dar al-Fatwa, November 2013

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with International Crisis Group, INGOs and Ittihad, October and November 2013

<sup>58</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



### 4.2.3 *Ittihad*

With the refugee crisis spreading from North Lebanon to Bekaa in the East, Saida in the South, and finally Mount Lebanon and Greater Beirut, a new union was founded to bring together charities from all areas. Meanwhile, Ittihad includes almost 100 associations nationwide.

The structural setup of Ittihad is professional. An administrative council is elected by staff from all participating associations and by the 10 initiating associations. This council then elects the General Secretary and the General Coordinator. Units and divisions in the head office in Beirut cover the programmes and coordination with the member associations, as well as marketing, media, and law. Each field office sends an employee to work at the head office. Meetings between the head office in Beirut and the respective field offices take place on weekly and monthly bases. Some of their programmes are coordinated through the Beirut office. This includes medical care, camp management, psychological support, and a loan programme. Ittihad runs over 50 hospitals and about 15 camps across the country. In a new programme, they have started to give loans to refugee families to help them start new businesses. Thus far, they have assisted 150 families and aim to further expand the programme from the capital to the other parts of the country. The relief work and the 22 operating schools are being coordinated by the local charities, as the head office does not have the capacity to regulate this.<sup>60</sup> Through their common database, they are able to avoid duplication: “People get money from this charity and go to another city; like [they come] from Damascus to Zahle [receive money], [then go on] to [another charity in] Saida, and then back to Damascus where they sell it.”<sup>61</sup> The database details exactly which family received what kind of assistance, and offers an effective coordination system.

Although Ittihad presents its association on a highly professional level – including brochures, maps, and video clips – the representative did not mention anything about their political affiliation: one of the few things all of the other conversation partners would agree on, however, is that

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Ittihad, November 2013

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Ittihad is the charity arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. But given that fact, the same is valid for Ittihad as it is for Ittilaf: the union includes not only the Muslim Brotherhood, but Druze and secular associations as well. The political affiliation explains the professional setup of the organisation as well as the enormous funding behind the union. The Muslim Brotherhood is quite experienced in building their institutions on a highly professional level. While the money comes from international donors worldwide, the bulk comes from private donations from charities in the Gulf countries, Tunisia, and Algeria. The Kuwaiti and Qatari governments have also sent money, as well as the London-based international NGO Islamic Relief.<sup>62</sup> Member charities also receive funding on bilateral basis, but according to the head office in Beirut, they would report back that they received a certain amount of money, which will then be included in the calculation of distribution from Beirut. When Ittihad receives its funding, it distributes the money according to the dispersion of refugees in Lebanon. That means that North of Bekaa would currently receive 15% of the funding, because 15% of Syrian refugees have settled there (in November 2013).<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the head office assumes that they inform their bilateral donors of the mechanism of Ittihad for future funding.<sup>64</sup>

In the area of Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon, Ittihad works closely with Dar al-Fatwa on the basis of a shared database. However, Ittihad also outlines the independence of its charity from Dar al-Fatwa: in contrast to Dar al-Fatwa, Ittihad insists that they are working as a pure humanitarian charity, while Dar al-Fatwa works less on humanitarian than on religious principles. The contradicting declarations, combined with information gathered through third parties suggests that both Ittihad and Ittilaf are charity associations based on Islamic principles but linked to political parties or movements, while Dar al-Fatwa is the umbrella association for Islamic charities based on Islamic principles. Although all three of them do humanitarian work based on Islamic principles, Ittihad and Ittilaf seem to identify themselves primarily with their political movements, and are not subordinate to the religious authority.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.2.4 *Educational Programmes of the Charities*

In Lebanon, the number of Syrian children of school age is expected to reach 400,000 by the end of 2013<sup>65</sup> – accounting for about 60% of pupils in Lebanon. Schools are overstrained and cannot provide spaces for every child. The biggest obstacle, however, is the curriculum. Most of the subjects are provided in English or French, while the Syrian curriculum is in Arabic, thus it is impossible for Syrian children to keep up. As a result, Syrian children have dropped out of school. This alone causes a great deal of concern among international NGOs and Syrian civil society activists, as a whole generation of Syrian children has lost months, if not years, of education.

Syrian parents register their children with non-formal schools run by the Islamic charities instead. These non-formal schools provide education according to the Syrian curriculum, but focus only on a few subjects such as Arabic and maths, and replace subjects relating to the regime of Assad with Islamic issues.<sup>66</sup> Hence, the Syrian curriculum is being given an immense religious component. It is Syrian civil society activists themselves who raise this concern: it is Islamic, not Muslim thoughts that are taught in these schools. With “Islamic,” they mean thoughts about Jihad, about the fight against other religions, thoughts that are not purely religious Muslim ideas, but bear a political, a radical message.<sup>67</sup> Boys and girls are separated in school, which was never the case in Syria. In contrast to Jordan, there are no reports of remuneration for pupils; however, they receive food and non-food items when attending schools. But these schools are not recognised officially: pupils do not receive any certificates that allow them to pursue higher education later. This phenomenon is primarily happening in the area around Tripoli, which has been a stronghold of conservative Sunni Islam for a very long time. Many of the charities providing this kind of education directly follow the guidelines of the Muslim Brotherhood according to the educational guidelines provided by Ittihad; others present Salafist ideas.

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<sup>65</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/lebanon\\_70797.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/lebanon_70797.html)

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Syrian activists in Lebanon, November 2013

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

The funding for educational activities comes from the donors mentioned previously: associations and private individuals from the Gulf countries – such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but also from the Maghreb. The Saudi and the Qatari government have been big donors, but they recently suspended their funds. The reason for this is unknown. The donors not only fund, but they also impose their curriculums. Some schools, for example, teach a Libyan curriculum, which then includes Islamic thought spread in Libya. Overall, these charities receive huge amounts of money, which puts them in a position of being almost the only alternative provider of education, and of being able to offer job opportunities to Syrians. Most Syrians are conservative themselves, but refuse to adapt the ideas of Muslim Brothers or Salafists. They are not happy with the developments towards this kind of Islamic ideas and do not want to work for those charities, but do not have many other options to feed their families.<sup>68</sup> These trends, however, are not only happening in Tripoli, they seem to be prevalent across the region – even more so in Jordan, and also in Turkey. It's a phenomenon that raises huge fears among the democratic Syrians: in a society as ethnically and religiously diverse as Syria's, curricula that focus so heavily on Sunni Islam, and even more call for Jihad against non-Muslims, endanger the future of a peaceful, democratic Syrian society. Syrian activists in Lebanon therefore call for the UN to release more money into education for their future generations.

It is not clear how aware the international community is regarding the influence these charities have. Some organisations, including UNHCR, do not see the problem in Quran classes in addition to the regular curriculum, but they are worried that parents take their children out of the Lebanese state schools and put them only in religious schools where they do not receive a proper education for the future. Some international NGOs, however, see Syrian children attending Lebanese schools as a short- or mid-term solution and favour the parallel system.

The system of charitable associations has the same basis as in Jordan: *zakat* committees. One could state that the two associations of the Muslim

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Brotherhood in Lebanon and in Jordan have a similar standard regarding the professional set-up of their organisations, their programming, and their fundraising. The long existence of the political party in the region and their experiences in running huge institutions and networks are mirrored in their charity bodies. Assuming that Ittilaf is dominated or even led by Salafist movements, it is not one big association like al-Kitab wal-Sunna in Jordan. It much more reflects the reality of diverse Lebanese political and religious groups and civil society, by combining different actors on the ground into a well-functioning network. It is interesting to see how the same networks work on a common base, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and at the same time adjust to the different political landscapes of the countries, such as the Salafist movements.

### **4.3 Islamic Charities and the Humanitarian Community**

A look at cooperation between the Islamic charities and international organisations in Lebanon remains unclear as to their set-ups. Humanitarian actors do not agree on the mechanism and extent of cooperation taking place. Nevertheless, cooperation looks very similar, as in Jordan. Cooperation mainly exists either on the level of UN institutions and associations with a huge outreach, or between international NGOs and single Islamic charities. A formal cooperation – such as between UNICEF and al-Markaz al-Islami – could not be found in Lebanon. Overall, the impression dominates that cooperation is even less frequent than in Jordan.

#### *4.3.1 Cooperation on the Central Level*

The main cooperation between Islamic charities and the international community takes place on a central level between the official religious authority of Lebanon, Dar al-Fatwa, and the coordinating UN-agencies such as UNHCR.<sup>69</sup> The cooperation includes the attendance of coordination meetings with Dar al-Fatwa as representative of the Islamic charities across Lebanon, as well as bilateral cooperation, especially in Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon.<sup>70</sup> This cooperation is highly important: when

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

<sup>70</sup> Interview with UNHCR office for Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon, October 2013

refugees enter the country, their first path leads them to the local charities whose system they are familiar with. Those charities forward names and lists to Dar al-Fatwa where they are gathered in the common database. This provides a basis for an extensive geographical and demographical cooperation between Dar al-Fatwa and UNHCR. It is the same approach as in Jordan: for the big UN institutions, cooperation on such a level facilitates procedures. Apart from that, Dar al-Fatwa claims to cooperate with several of the bigger international NGOs and so claims Ittihad.

To further improve the capacities of Dar al-Fatwa and therewith ensure a more effective cooperation, UNHCR supports the charities – at least on the Beirut level – in training their volunteers and in institutional and organisational capacity building.<sup>71</sup> The development of these charities is already seen in their fieldwork: the way they conduct the assessments and the way they are present in the field are very close to the international standards. They have different categories of vulnerable groups with specific needs, they conduct assessments, and they provide training for their staff. Yet, they use a different approach and are not accustomed to the humanitarian armada and their coordination mechanism.<sup>72</sup>

Also on a central level, Ittihad, international NGOs and UN agencies are indirectly linked under the broader cooperation framework. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) has contracts with Islamic Relief, an international organisation, for the provision of food parcels to newcomers and refugees with a pending registration of more than four weeks. In order to enhance the outreach work with communities and have better access to this vulnerable caseload, Islamic Relief contracts some organisations under Ittihad to distribute the WFP food parcels. Whereas WFP holds Islamic Relief accountable for the implementation of its projects and is in no way responsible for the actions of Ittihad, Islamic Relief can decide to outsource some of their work to a third party. This enables huge institutions such as UN agencies to indirectly benefit from existing networks for enhanced humanitarian assistance.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with UNHCR Greater Beirut and Mount Lebanon office, October 2013

<sup>72</sup> Interview with UNHCR, October 2013

#### 4.3.2 *Cooperation on the Field Level*

Cooperation on the field level also faces the same main challenges as in Jordan. It is mostly international NGOs who would cooperate on that level and they come to the same conclusion as their colleagues in Jordan: cooperation takes place every now and then for single projects, but is far from a continuous partnership. Again, the problem for international organisations with regard to formal cooperation lies primarily in the lack of transparency and accountability. International NGOs are principally biased towards cooperation as they question the transparency of the charities and assume religious or political agendas behind their charity work. Cases such as Ittihad are an example of why official partnerships are so difficult to establish. It is common knowledge that the charity belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood, a political movement that is seen with mistrust among Western powers. A step towards more trust could be made by officially acknowledging this and opening up about the educational and social programmes, so partners would know about contexts and agendas instead of speculating and refusing official partnerships. That of course demands that the international NGOs take more notice of their work, approach them, sit with them and talk about international standards, and finally support them in training and capacity building. But contrarily, one international NGO stated that some Western donors have tried to understand on what conditions donors from the Gulf countries distribute their money, in order to channel it away from the charities towards UN institutions.<sup>73</sup>

Similar to Jordan, the main challenge lies in the different methods and standards, and the perception of humanitarian assistance or Islamic charity. One side has an approach based on Islamic principles, while the other side has an approach based on humanitarian principles. These principles are not that different from each other, as both systems, for example, work on the principle of humanity – both applying general humanitarian criteria, such as child protection or special attention for old and sick persons. Other humanitarian principles, such as neutrality and impartiality, cause problems when Islamic charities prefer certain ethnic groups, are linked to

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with INGO, October 2013

political parties, or simply do not share their agendas. On the other hand, the approach of the UN and the international organisations is a complex system, thus a huge challenge for the charities that work in a completely different system. They don't have the capacity to cope with the educated staff, the funds, or the professional knowledge international organisations have. This difference does not affect the collaboration on the ground, but it hinders international organisations from forming official partnerships. It is not possible for them to sign a partnership or to work together with organisations that cannot operate their programmes on a standard that conforms to UN or international NGO standards.

#### *4.3.3 Coordination*

Coordination in Lebanon faces the same challenges as it does in Jordan. The system of coordination – which includes meetings held in English and the use of tools and databases unfamiliar to the charities – prevent them from participating. On the other hand, individual Islamic charities may not see the importance of coordinating activities in order to avoid duplications and reach more beneficiaries. The non-existing coordination, however, is a dilemma: whereas cooperation is indeed difficult to execute, the high potential for improving relations and collaboration lies in coordination, because coordinating organisations do not need to rely on the same criteria. Coordination can happen through partners who have different approaches and systems; it simply offers the chance to focus assistance and to include as many beneficiaries as possible. A chance that has not yet been taken.



## 5 Conclusions

Comparing the situation in Jordan and Lebanon, the main difference in the role of Islamic charities active in the refugee crisis lies in the political systems of both countries. In Jordan, the overall number of local Islamic charities is controlled by the Ministry of Awqaf, which means that it is under strict supervision of the Jordanian government. Although it is not clear to what extent al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami are also bound to governmental directions or underlie separate systems financed from abroad, the overall situation of Islamic charities – and international organisations as well – is based on directives given by a central political authority. In Lebanon, the political system and its parties are split according to religious or ethnic affiliation. The permanent fights and unrest between these parties weaken the power of governmental institutions and partly even lead to a suspension of state authority. This created a strong and experienced civil society acting freely and not necessarily bound to governmental instructions. They react immediately when needed and gather their resources and power – a phenomenon that could not happen in Jordan's very centralised political system. Islamic charities are part of this Lebanese civil society.

But despite that difference, the idea behind Islamic charities in both countries is based on the same principle of Islamic charity, and the way they are set up and operate is quite similar: local charities linked to a mosque or community centre. They are funded through *zakat* or (mainly since the Syrian crisis) donations from the Gulf countries. They largely work with volunteers from the neighbourhood, and they have their own criteria for assistance, which are similar to internationally binding humanitarian criteria, but not yet on the same objective standard. These include, for example, that special attention not only focuses on children, women, families without income, or sick and old people, but also on families of martyrs. This system also applies for the bigger associations such as Ittihad and Ittilaf in Lebanon, and al-Kitab wal-Sunna and al-Markaz al-Islami in Jordan.

Comparing the role that Islamic charities play in the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis in Jordan and in Lebanon leads to three main conclusions: First, in both countries, the charities not only fill a gap in

humanitarian assistance, but they also function as a parallel system to the UN-coordinated international intervention. Thus, they are able to answer humanitarian needs with which the international community struggles. Their biggest strength thereby is their presence in the community. They are on the ground, witness new developments in the refugee and in the host communities on a daily basis and can answer them immediately. Another reason for their fast response is the simple structure within each charity. The system of planning, monitoring, evaluating, and coordinating is not as comprehensive as within international organisations.

On the other hand, this advantage can easily become a disadvantage: through their system, they have less capacity than they would have as part of the international humanitarian community; they have fewer funds and can reach fewer refugees; through their non-professional system, they lack proper monitoring of their projects; they have less accountability towards refugees who experience an aid system that is not based on objective criteria, but often on favouritism or affiliation with relatives. As part of a humanitarian machine, there is certainly potential for more development of Islamic charities through training in capacity development, transparency, and accountability. The UNICEF approach towards al-Markaz al-Islami in Jordan is certainly moving in a right direction, providing potential benefits for both partners and, moreover, for the refugees. It is a matter of developing the controlling mechanisms and absolute transparency, which could lead to a cooperation that can be adopted by other organisations on both sides. However, the question remains to what extent a transformation of Islamic charities has to be aimed for. As long as the two systems coexist, nothing more than informal cooperation and coordination can take place. Nevertheless, the facts on the ground prove that the system of Islamic charities is much more than a “less professional international” system. It works complementarily and provides opportunities to fill each other’s gaps. The aim of training should not be a transformation of Islamic charities into NGOs, but to provide them with proficiency to improve their work, while at the same time using their systems and set-ups to fill a gap that cannot be covered by the international community.

The second conclusion refers to the fact that behind some of these charities stands a huge network of political or religious groups whose ideas of

human rights are incompatible. The religious background of the charities has often been used as argument by international organisations against considering local charities as equal partners and intensifying cooperation. A lot of speculation, condemnation – and maybe prejudices – about these ideologies circulate not only within Western societies, but also within democratic Arab movements. Because of the minimal transparency that these associations give about their networks and the religious and political components in their programmes, it is difficult to know what in fact their agendas are. As long as they are not open about this kind of information, cooperation between them and international agencies remains difficult. The suspicion prevails that groups of Salafists, Muslim Brothers, or other Islamist movements use their humanitarian programmes to influence the long-term religious and political thinking of refugees and turn it into an ideology that violates human rights. On the other hand, it would be up to the international humanitarian community to take the charities on board, offer them common approaches, and request more transparency regarding their backgrounds and intentions.

Having brought up this point, it must be said – as third conclusion – that being religious and conservative does not automatically mean having an Islamist agenda as people in the Western hemisphere often fear. Quran schools, for example, have always been part of the societies and becoming more religious does not mean becoming fanatic, nor is it a reason to raise fears. As mentioned above, it is important to follow the agenda of these groups and demand more transparency in order to intensify cooperation. With regard to the refugees in Jordan, one could assume that they will become more conservative, while adjusting to a more conservative host society. This is generally not an issue that should be impeded by non-Muslim humanitarian actors. What should be prevented is a turn towards a religious or political attitude that violates basic human rights.

## **6 Recommendations**

These conclusions help to advocate a new approach between the international humanitarian community and Islamic charities. Most important, this requires a relationship of trust. For that, the key Western actors must continue to demand more transparency from Islamic associations. But, although the UN and international NGOs are the key actors in terms of providing humanitarian assistance, they are doing a work in a region and countries that have different approaches to aid, as well as to political and religious thinking. As Western guests, they should pay more attention to these traditions and institutional systems in the context of a refugee crisis. It should be in the interest of international agencies to use the options and chances that accompany closer cooperation with Islamic charities. If both parties take into account how much they could improve humanitarian assistance when sitting together and developing a common approach by combining efforts, huge benefits could be won for both humanitarians and more than that, for the refugees.

However, when facing groups that are based on non-democratic principles in violation of human rights and where no cooperation or coordination is possible, the field should not be left to them. It is necessary to look at where they might be active, which gaps they might fill, and why they might be so popular among refugees. It is then up to other humanitarian actors to challenge them and to try filling these gaps by themselves. One example for that is education in Lebanon. With Lebanese schools being overrun and Syrian children struggling to cope with the Lebanese curriculum, many Syrians prefer sending their children to either Quran schools or other schools run by charities where the curricula are unclear. When a way of cooperation and open exchange cannot be found to answer this challenge together, international organisations and donors need to strengthen their efforts to provide Syrian children with proper education and keep them away from one-sided religious education.

There is a huge potential for improving humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees, by combining efforts and improving collaboration and cooperation between Islamic charities and international humanitarian organisations. It will not be possible to transfer the system of Islamic charities into that of international NGOs, but it is possible to further train charities in capacity building and in transparency, and to benefit from their direct access to refugees and from the experience they have on the ground. And it is possible to change the attitude towards Islamic charities and include them more intensively in international cooperation. Neither the international community nor the Islamic charities can afford to fight this crisis on their own.



