"There is no other alternative than finding solutions"

A study of Syrian refugee organizations in Cairo

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Abstract

After the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Syrian refugees fled to the neighboring countries, including Egypt. In and around Cairo, these newly arrived Syrians have created several support organizations offering different services to the Syrian community. Balancing between helping their clients, competing for funds with larger organizations and obeying the strict Egyptian laws regulating their work, they are today offering services to thousands of Syrians all over Cairo.

The Syrian-led organizations claim to be independent from political and religious movements, to serve all equally and to offer an improvement of life situation for their beneficiaries. Nevertheless, these aid organizations are facing several internal and external challenges in their operations, which is hindering and limiting their work in Cairo.

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted in Cairo February-March 2015, meeting five Syrian-led organizations working in different parts of Cairo. The research seeks to answer what characterizes these organizations, what motives they give for their services and in what degree they are able to participate in the climate shaped by larger, international agencies and Egyptian restrictions on civil society.
Acknowledgement

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Note on transliteration

When transcribing Arabic words I have used the directions provided by the International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies.

Examples include words not commonly found in English, like mū’assasa and ghīṭā’. For more common words like Quran and Sunni I have used the English spelling. I have also written names of areas in Cairo as they are normally spelled in English, for example Giza and Faysal.

The names of persons and organizations are transcribed according to IJMES guidelines, without diacritics but respecting ‘ayn and ‘hamza.

The definite article in Arabic is written as “al-”. It is not capitalized, unless in the beginning of a sentence.
TABLE OF CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 2
  1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION.................................................................................................. 3
  1.2 WHY THIS TOPIC?......................................................................................................... 3
  1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS .................................................................................... 4

2 FIELDWORK AND ETHICAL CONCERNS ........................................................................ 5
  2.1 FIELDWORK ................................................................................................................ 5
  2.1.1 Chalenges in the interview setting ........................................................................ 7
  2.2 PROTECTION OF INFORMANTS AND ANONYMITY .................................................. 8
  2.2.1 Informed consent .................................................................................................... 9

3 RESEARCH ON REFUGEE PARTICIPATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY ...................... 10
  3.1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ............................................................................................... 10
  3.2 REFUGEES AND PARTICIPATION ............................................................................. 11
    3.2.1 Organizational participation ................................................................................ 11
    3.2.2 The benefits of community participation .............................................................. 13
  3.3 CIVIL SOCIETY TRENDS: REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ............ 14
    3.3.1 Social movements in the Arab world ...................................................................... 14
    3.3.2 Civil society in Egypt .......................................................................................... 15
  3.4 CHALLENGES OF HUMANITARIAN AID .................................................................. 16
    3.4.1 Growth and changes .......................................................................................... 16
    3.4.2 “Paternalistic, unsuccessful, prone to surveillance”? ............................................. 17

4 BACKGROUND: WHO ARE THE SYRIANS? START OF THE INFLUX TO EGYPT .... 19
  4.1 A TYPICAL SYRIAN IN CAIRO? ............................................................................... 19
  4.2 “THE EVENTS OF JUNE 30” .................................................................................... 20
  4.3 THE CURRENT SITUATION ......................................................................................... 21
  4.4 SYRIAN ORGANIZATIONS IN EGYPT ....................................................................... 22
    4.4.1 Syria Tomorrow Relief Foundation ........................................................................ 22
    4.4.2 Syrian Emergency Team (SET) ............................................................................. 23
    4.4.3 Souriat Association .............................................................................................. 24
    4.4.4 Tadamon ............................................................................................................... 24
    4.4.5 Hamzat al-Khatib Charity Association ................................................................. 26

5 DEFINING THE SYRIAN ORGANIZATIONS .................................................................. 28
  5.1 WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATIONS ARE THEY RUNNING? .................................... 28
    5.1.1 CBO or NGO? ...................................................................................................... 28
    5.1.2 Non-movements? ................................................................................................. 30
  5.2 AN INTERNAL STRUCTURE ....................................................................................... 32
    5.2.1 A quest for respect? ............................................................................................. 32
  5.3 CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................. 35

6 THE MOTIVES OF THE SYRIAN ORGANIZATIONS .................................................. 38
  6.1 A NEW SOCIAL STRUCTURE: SOURIAT ................................................................. 38
    6.1.1 Creating a new family ......................................................................................... 38
    6.1.2 Rebuilding social structures ................................................................................. 40
  6.2 BEARING THE RESPONSIBILITY: THE SYRIAN EMERGENCY TEAM (SET) ....... 41
    6.2.1 For the children .................................................................................................... 41
    6.2.2 For rebuilding Syria ............................................................................................. 43
  6.3 OFFERING A LONG-TERM PLAN: SYRIA TOMORROW ......................................... 45
    6.3.1 Sustainability ........................................................................................................ 47
  6.4 REPRESENT ALL FRACTIONS: TADAMON ............................................................... 49
    6.4.1 Non-religious ....................................................................................................... 49
6.4.2 Non-political

6.5 CONCLUSION

7 COOPERATION AND COMPETITION: WORKING WITH PARTNERS

7.1 THE ROLE OF THE UNHCR

7.1.1 Selecting partners

7.2 BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF COOPERATION

7.2.1 Mistrust and accusations

7.2.2 “Their goal is to register as many as possible”

7.3 UTILIZING THEIR DIFFERENT STRENGTHS

7.3.1 Different descriptions of the situation

7.4 THE BACKDROP: DONOR POWER

7.4.1 Reasons for underfunding

7.4.2 Do they have donor independence?

7.5 CONCLUSION

8 EGYPTIAN HINDRANCES: LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS ON NGOS

8.1 CIVIL SOCIETY IN EGYPT

8.2 CONSEQUENCES OF THE NGO LAW

8.2.1 Suspicion and defamation tactics

8.3 SOLUTIONS FOR NGOs

8.3.1 To register

8.3.2 Not to register

8.3.3 Help from an “umbrella organization”

8.3.4 Help from (Egyptian) connections

8.4 NEGOTIATING SOLUTIONS

8.5 OFFERING PROTECTION AND LEGAL SERVICES

8.5.1 Protection and legal residency

8.5.2 Attempts to address legal issues

8.6 UNABLE TO SOLVE THE MAIN PROBLEM?

8.7 CONCLUSION

9 CONCLUSION

10 REFERENCES

11 LIST OF INTERVIEWS
1 Introduction

Our goal is the service of all the Syrian people here in Egypt. If the revolution ends tomorrow and this Syrian community in Egypt can return, this community will be true and proper. So they are able to rebuild the country.1

After the onset of civil war in Syria in 2011, a wave of Syrian refugees fled to the neighboring countries, and some made it to Egypt. Though Egypt at the start of the civil war welcomed their Syrian brethren, this attitude did not last and the borders rapidly closed, leaving many families divided as a result. There are 123,585 Syrians registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Egypt (as per 30 November 2015).2 They are spread throughout the country, though most live in the big cities, namely Cairo and Alexandria. They receive support from the UNHCR and their partner organizations, though they also have to work to provide for themselves and their families. In and around Cairo, newly arrived Syrians have created several support organizations offering services to thousands all over the capital. As the quote above shows, they do not lack ambition or vision; though struggle with a scarcity of just about everything else. Their services range from offering English classes and sewing courses, to housing, provision of alimentary aid and medication. They claim to be independent from political and religious movements, to serve all equally and offer an improvement of life situation for their beneficiaries. Nevertheless, these aid organizations are facing several internal and external challenges in their operations, which is hindering and limiting their work in Cairo.

The already restrictive Egyptian Law on Associations was revised in 2014 to further challenge the work done by civil society organizations. The law restricts who gets permission to work, what kind of work they can take on, and where the funding should come from. This has further made the work difficult for all civil society organizations active in the country, not in the least those run by Syrian and other refugees that do not enjoy the same civil or personal rights as their Egyptian colleagues.

This does not make Egypt void of civil society groups or voluntary organizations. Quite the opposite, from state sponsored programs, to international agencies with seemingly unlimited resources; from initiative taking NGOs and Islamic groups to informal activist networks, many actors create services, advocate and at a larger scale shape the civil society in Egypt.

1 Mostafa, Interview by author, Cairo, February 15, 2015.
Working alongside this international aid system means that the small Syrian organizations are being drawn into cooperation with more experienced agents, while also competing for funds and trying to maintain their own independence and autonomy.

My argument is that these organizations are undertaking essential work for their community, whilst being hindered by important obstacles: government restrictions and larger agencies’ involvement and dominion on the field. In this thesis I wish to describe some of these Syrian-led organizations, the motives they give for their activities and in what degree they are able to reach their goals as actors in aid provision.

In order to best describe these organizations from the inside I have conducted interviews with leaders, founders, employees and volunteers from five Syrian-led organizations in Cairo. In addition I have spoken with a legal rights activist, UNHCR employees and decision makers, as well as an Egyptian-based researcher on the field of migration.

1.1 Research question

My research questions are:

1) How can we define the organizations run by Syrian refugees in Cairo? Are they informal ad-hoc movements or formalized organizations?

2) What motives do they give themselves for their services? Do they seek to advocate to improve the situation for the Syrians? Or fill a gap in services not being provided?

3) What challenges do they meet when trying to implement their activities? Are they hindered or helped by the work of larger, more experienced organizations? Are they able to function in Egypt, where strict laws govern civil society?

1.2 Why this topic?

During my time working for a legal aid organization for refugees in Egypt in 2013 I witnessed the flourishing of Syrian organizations that had been created from the onset of their arrival in 2011. In a country with few rights for refugees often expected to stay in limbo while waiting years (or even decades) for resettlement, the refugee-led organizations may represent a source of continuous support, socialization and comfort. This does not mean that all refugee groups create organizations, and if they do, they are not always well-functioning or sustainable places for the group. There are large variations between the refugee communities in general. The Syrians, though more resourceful in terms of their socio-economic background than some other refugee groups in Cairo, completely lack
organizational experience from their home country. Their limited experience participating in civil society makes their efforts noteworthy. No academic work, as far as I have been able to tell, is as of yet being done on their attempts at participation in Egypt.

In addition, Egypt was one of the first countries to experience the dramatic upheavals of the Arab Spring. Since then, the situation for civil society has been followed with interest as hope bloomed for positive changes in policy. These Syrian organizations are drawn into this specific local context. Their organizations can tell us not only about the Syrian wish to participate, but also about the ability of independent organizations to operate in Egypt. In this way, the study also presents some trends in civil society participation in the Middle Eastern region in general, outreaching that of this specific case.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

First, I will explain my methodological and theoretical approach to this topic. I will then move on to the necessary background information about the Syrian refugee influx to Egypt. What do we know about the Syrians that travelled to Egypt post-2011? Their situation has been strongly affected by the political changes that occurred in Egypt from 2011-2014. This has created challenges for them during the time they have spent there, and also influences the Syrian organizations and their services. I will also briefly present the Syrian organizations I have visited.

Moving on, chapter 5 and 6 will offer a deeper description of the Syrian organizations. I will address both the specificities of their internal structure, how we can define and describe their participation and what motives they give for offering their services. Chapter 7 and 8 will look at what challenges they are facing. Firstly, their cooperation partners that are also their main competition. These consist of other international actors, namely the UNHCR and their partner organizations, which are instrumental in shaping the services to refugees in Egypt. Secondly, I will describe the Egyptian climate for civil society activism, and the regulations that are governing the organizations that attempt to participate. Lastly, I will present my conclusion on the organizations’ ability to participate and what role they can have for their beneficiaries.
2 Fieldwork and ethical concerns

My study is based on written materials as well as a five-week fieldwork in Cairo February-March 2015. During this period I did all of my interviews of various lengths and spoke with a total of 29 people. My visit to Egypt was marked by several small bomb attacks targeting military and police facilities, as well as more civilian targets, such as the airport arrival hall, restaurants and mobile phone stores. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly advised against travel to Cairo at the time. Despite this situation, I felt the need to travel. This was because of the importance of the visit for my study and the fact that I have lived and worked in Egypt for a total of three years. I therefore know Cairo well and I have a large network of friends and former coworkers. This strongly contributed to my feeling of security and control during my stay.

Since I have previously worked with refugees in Egypt for a non-governmental organization (NGO), I assumed I would have little difficulty getting in touch with informants through my network and former colleagues. This was to some extent true, as a former colleague helped me before arrival with names of organizations I could contact and even contact information for individual leaders. However, since he had left Cairo a while back, I expected that new groups might have surfaced. I therefore ended up searching for organizations on Facebook and in Egyptian media, as well as asking informants if they knew of other organizations I could speak with. All people and organizations I reached were positive to my request for an interview, but not all followed through. This was unfortunate, but the time I could spend contacting organizations that were not responding was limited as I had little time in Cairo.

2.1 Fieldwork

For this study I chose to use qualitative methods as they aim to explain why something happens and as per sociologist Tove Thagaard’s definition provides an understanding of social phenomena. What is important in my study is how the people I have spoken with see themselves, understand and interpret their own reality. The organizations have bloomed from the members’ personal commitment to the Syrian community in Cairo and I wished to get their opinions on the topic. Researchers on the field of migration (such as Katarzyna Grabska, Barbara Harrell-Bond and Gaim Kibreab) have criticized that the remarks of refugees themselves, what they want and what their needs are, are not sufficiently brought to the table

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3 Tove Thagaard, Systematikk Og Innlevelse: En Innføring I Kvalitativ Metode (Bergen: Fagbokforl., 2013), 11.
in research or policy implementation. Instead, they claim policy is influenced by service providers’ or governments’ needs and priorities, based on assumptions of what the refugees wish for themselves. Anthropologically angled studies, giving the space for people to explain what they wish and want for themselves, can be an important counterweight to this.

In my fieldwork I conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders, employees and volunteers in Syrian-led organizations. I also spoke with four employees in the UNHCR, a researcher working at the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies and a human rights lawyer working especially with Syrian cases. I came to the interviews prepared with topics I wanted to discuss, but at the same time aimed at obtaining an atmosphere in which my informants could address the issues they found interesting. The strength of this approach is that a certain flexibility in the interview setting can help ensure that the interview is adapted to the individual informant and also that I avoided spending time discussing issues that they did not see as relevant. I made sure that all sensitive questions about political affiliation, the financial situation of the organization or personal beliefs came in the later part of the interview so that I would have time to build some confidence and make it more comfortable for them to answer my questions.

To as large extent as possible I tried incorporating both observation and participation when visiting the organizations. My stay in the organizations varied from a couple of hours formal interview sessions to whole days spent helping with work, eating and talking with several employees and volunteers. By spending more time and observing it was easier to get an impression of the organizations’ work and I could also look for contradictions in words and actions. I also attempted to visit several branches of each organization (if they had different branches). I soon learned it was quite easy to obtain what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls a thin description, as all the organization members were very interested in describing what they were doing and how they were helping. However, what I wanted to obtain was a thick description, not only look at what the informants say and do, but how they explain and

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5 Thagaard, *Systematikk Og Innlevelse*, 89.
7 Ibid, 39.
understand their own actions, seen in context. During the later phase of analyzing my material also my interpretations as a researcher become important to obtain such a thick description.

Apart from researchers and UNHCR staff very few of my informants spoke more than basic English. I expected this when preparing the fieldwork and had prepared to do all interviews in Arabic. As I have studied Arabic for years and lived in both Egypt and Syria I expected this would not be a problem. My informants would normally speak in their Syrian dialect, clarifying with Egyptian or standard Arabic words if I did not understand them at first. This worked well, as I felt that I gained both trust and good will as a non-Arab person having learned their language and showing interest in their issues. In addition, I had time to prepare the interviews, as opposed to them; therefore it was important that they were communicating in the language they were most comfortable with. Because I used a tape recorder I could revisit the conversations if points were lost on me the first time around.

2.1.1 Challenges in the interview setting

In the interview setting I found I had to be careful using words that could be seen as pejorative or demeaning. Some did not welcome a word like “refugee” when used generally on all Syrians in Cairo and I was sometimes corrected when using it. As the people I met with were mostly activists, they perhaps saw the word as minimizing their efforts, even though they technically fit the definition of the word. Asking about and discussing the Islamist organization the Muslim Brotherhood was also sensitive, because of their role in Egyptian politics and the controversy surrounding the group. I often got vague and unclear answers when I asked about such personal, political opinions. This could be because of lack of trust but I think it was equally important that the organizations did not belong to any political current. Several members emphasized that their own political opinions had no place in their work and might not wish to share personal opinions because it was not relevant.

A problem that surfaced repeatedly in the interviews was that the role I wished, as an impartial researcher asking questions, was not the role I was given. This role was perhaps new to them and they therefore tried placing me in a more familiar role. I often felt I was given the role of a “white, rich benefactor” that could help with different issues. I was for example repeatedly asked if I could help get visas to Norway, renew passports, become a member of their organizations, offer funding or help them in other ways. Tove Thagaard

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8 Ibid.
9 I describe the organizations’ political neutrality in 6.4.1.
highlights the importance of the researcher negotiating an appropriate role, by explaining the purpose behind the interview and clarifying what he or she can help with. Although I started every interview explaining the purpose of my research, this role created some conflicts and made me uncomfortable. However, I soon learned that the inquiries were often a matter of curiosity and by answering them honestly and kindly I could put such inquiries to rest and move on.

2.2 Protection of informants and anonymity

The study of vulnerable people is in and of itself an ethical concern. This study is concerned with the life and running of organizations more than the life of individual members. Most of my questions were therefore not personal in nature, but rather concerned practical sides of running the organization and the ideas behind them. However, this does not free me from considering ethical dilemmas, because personal topics would come up. Questions I deemed to be innocent, such as reasons for why the individual member had chosen to become active, sometimes led to personal stories of the flight and loss of family and friends. Because of this, I always explained the reasons behind my project to each person and underlined that they did not have to answer questions they were not comfortable with. I mainly did interviews one on one.

I have chosen not to include the names of my informants, except for the ones that are easily identifiable as the official leaders of their organizations. To ease the reading of the text I have given the anonymous informants Arabic first names. None of my informants requested anonymity, but despite my explanations of the project, it concerns me that they may not have fully thought through the implications of having their full names. I have three reasons for choosing to use pseudonyms. First, the fact that I am studying at a university in Norway, a country some had no previous knowledge of, could make them think its publication would not affect them. Secondly, it is difficult for me to know in what extent the Syrian embassy in Egypt or Egyptian officials pay attention to different research. But the material will be available for them and this might cause them problems. Lastly, it is hard to predict the future for these organizations and members, the situation could take a turn for the worse and information could be used against them. Either way, what is interesting for my research is the organizations as a whole and the efforts made there, not actions of individual members. I

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10 Thagaard, Systematikk Og Innlevelse, 73.
11 A complete list of everyone I interviewed with information such as job title and meeting place can be found on page 95.
have for this reason chosen to keep the names of the organizations intact, as not to harm the credibility of my study.

2.2.1 Informed consent
As per the ethical guidelines offered by the National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway, I made sure to obtain informed consent from all participants before starting the interview. I explained who I was, why I wished to talk with them, what my thesis aimed at and where it would be published. I also explained that they did not have to answer any question they deemed too personal or uncomfortable. I did not ask them to sign a paper to document that they were volunteer participants, as is common in some countries. I would not want responsibility to safeguard such papers and it might feel uncomfortable for my informants to sign.

As the Syrians in Egypt are a vulnerable group, in need of protection both from the Syrian and Egyptian government, I made every effort to make them comfortable. I always asked if I could use recording equipment, write their names and I let them decide where we should meet. As they all wanted to show me their organizations or offices, we made all meetings there. Some also took me to more public places, such as cafes and restaurants of their choosing where they felt comfortable.

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3 Research on refugee participation and civil society

My thesis touches upon two fields of theory: Refugee activism and the building of organizations. How is refugee activism explained within the field of research and what form might their organizations take? This is what this chapter will aim to explain.

I will start by outlining the available research we have so far on the newly arrived Syrians in Egypt, then defining what type of organizations we could be talking about in this context. As both organizational theory and refugee studies are rich fields, I will focus on topics relevant for my specific study, traits of refugee participation in the Arab region and some issues and challenges facing organization building. The country context of Egypt is equally important. Many scholars have argued that civil society participation can be expected to take on different forms in the Middle Eastern and North African region than what has previously been seen in other emerging democracies and other developing countries.

3.1 Previous research

As an academic phenomenon the Syrian civil war and ensuing mass movement of refugees must be said to be of recent date. Its repercussions are still complex and confusing though four years have passed since the feeble beginning of the war. The Syrian refugee crisis is given attention in Western media and among researchers, but their focus is largely on the effect on the European countries and Syria’s immediate neighbors. Egypt with its moderate number of Syrians is somewhat overlooked.

In Egypt however, the reception of Syrians is not seen as a small matter. The country has long been a hub for refugees and migrants from all over Africa, taking in refugees from the Liberian civil wars, the genocide in Darfur and the Iraqi invasion. Universities and research centers in Egypt have accordingly given the topic of migration a lot of interest. One example of this is the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) belonging to the American University in Cairo that works strategically with the field of migration. An example of a study on the Syrian influx is the quantitative study published in September 2014 by Maysa Ayoub and Shaden Khallaf Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Challenges of a Politically Changing Environment. This study describes the characteristics of the Syrian refugees making their way to Egypt and also presents the challenges they face in the Egyptian political climate. The UNHCR also regularly publishes reports outlining the specificities of the Syrian refugees in
different countries.\textsuperscript{13} These reports are based on their experiences from working with the Syrians in Egypt and also show some challenges and points of improvement.

This, however, does not mean this is a finished explored topic. There are, to my knowledge, no qualitative studies on the Syrians in Egypt as of now, describing how they themselves see their situation. Also, I have not been able to find research on the organizations they have built and their attempts at participation. I will therefore argue that this thesis is a small step on the way to provide insight in this unexplored topic.

3.2 Refugees and participation

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the UN defined the term refugee as a person fleeing armed conflict or persecution. While migrants flee to better their future, for example because of economic hardship, a refugee flees to save his or her life and cannot return to the home country.\textsuperscript{14} A refugee holds rights migrants do not have, such as the right not to be returned to one’s home country, protection from refoulement.\textsuperscript{15} Also, they have the right of protection while in the initial receiving state until a more durable solution is found for the person. More or less all Syrians fall into the refugee category, as the mass movement from their home country’s civil war makes it impossible to assess the asylum claim from each individual person.\textsuperscript{16} All Syrians in opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime could face persecution because of political opinion.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, most of the Syrians in Egypt are Sunni Muslims and as such belong to a religious group associated with opposition to the Allawi regime. This could cause persecution.

3.2.1 Organizational participation

The Syrians that have come to Egypt are participating in civil society through organizations. But what type of organizations have they created? Using the word organization as I have done so far is not precise enough, for they can take many shapes: From informal group initiatives and small-scale cooperation, to structured NGOs with a clear leadership and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
visions. To find an appropriate word, I will look at different types of participation where it might be natural to place these Syrian groups.

Katharzyna Grabska has studied Sudanese-led refugee organizations in Cairo, what she calls CBAs, community-based associations. She notes that most refugee communities in Egypt have established associations of some sort, often divided along ethnic or tribal lines and with various degrees of formality.\(^\text{18}\)

The UNHCR as well as other service providers in Egypt often uses this term, community-based organizations/associations (CBO or CBA), or community center about any organization run by the refugees. The UNHCR has wished to encourage communities organizing, and the regional office in Cairo started making some funding available in 2004. Grabska states that this has made it easier to start the work of building an organization, or community association. The organizations have the positive effect of involving the affected population in providing solutions. As she concludes:

> Refugees have to be part of the policy process in more meaningful ways by incorporating their own perceptions of rights and how they can be realized in the context of an urban setting in a developing country. Hence, to be effective, the participation of refugees in the policy setting should go beyond mere ‘consultation’.\(^\text{19}\)

Grabska looked at the services the Sudanese community-based associations and the larger agencies implemented to address the same problem. For example, both the UNHCR and the CBAs would focus on vocational training and skill building as a means to create an income. But where the UNHCR wished to include refugees in the formal job market as an end result, the CBAs saw this differently. Refugees lack legal rights and have difficulties obtaining a work permit, this naturally keep most refugees in the informal economy.\(^\text{20}\)

When speaking with the Sudanese community, Grabska met criticism of the programs offered to them and of general UNHCR policy determining their rights. The Sudanese community seemed to wish to participate in deciding what services should be offered to them. Through the CBAs, they had the means to act as a collective force and present their wishes and demands.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., 43.
3.2.2 *The benefits of community participation*

The building of such empowered communities can happen for different reasons, claims sociologist Charles Hirschman. At a conference at Princeton University in 2003, he presented a rebuttal to American theorist Will Herberg, rejecting his "classical account of immigration and religion in the United States". Herberg’s thesis was that immigrants become more religious after arrival to a new country, in order to preserve their culture and overcome the trauma they have faced. They therefore create centers of worship to preserve their newfound faith. This, according to Hirschman, ignores some other purposes of the religious communities. Herberg presents only the psychosocial benefits of religious participation, neglecting the socioeconomic results: churches and other religious communities as important centers of information sharing. Churches, mosques and temples do not only function as places of worship, they play the role of a new, extended family, where the immigrants far from their own can surround themselves with their own culture and customs, as well as get material and economic support. In addition to the traumatizing experience of flight, immigrants must attempt to familiarize themselves with a new culture and navigate the social rules in a new country. It is therefore natural that they will steer towards each other, meeting in familiar settings and observing the same rituals as in their native land. This promotes *psychosocial wellbeing*, the idea being that our social networks and external surroundings in turn influence our internal psychological state and vice versa. By building strong communities, individuals also benefit and get increased quality of life.

Just as important as this psychosocial effect, claims Hirschman, is the *social* function of the religious communities. The different religious centers are a place for immigrants to find employment, housing, enroll their children in school and maybe improve their language skills. Many places of worship have also played a charitable role, so some might also receive material assistance from their religious community. This way the religious center becomes more than a place of worship, it is also a place to get information, share news of possible work opportunities and housing facilities and connect with others. Ergo, the values of these religious communities are psychosocial, religious, social and economic.

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22 Ibid., 5.

23 Ibid., 7.
3.3 Civil society trends: Regional and national perspectives

Civil society is often called the third sector or voluntary sector, in contrast to the private sector and the public sector. It comprises organizations not run by private, for-profit actors or by the government. A prerequisite for civil society is therefore that it is separate from government control and regulation. Syria has not experienced this. Rana Khalaf, researcher at the Center for Syria studies at the University of St. Andrew’s explains in her paper *Activism in difficult times. Civil society groups in Syria 2011-2014* how strong government control on associations has compromised their ability to obtain funding and the very need for them has been downplayed. This was especially amplified since the ruling Ba’ath party established workers’ syndicates for all groups of the population, such as youth, journalists, farmers etc. 24 This means that civil society in Syria has been underdeveloped due to strong government restrictions and Syrians as a group have little experience in running organizations. Their forms of activism have not been described and what shape it might take is therefore uncertain.

This is interesting because scholars have found that civil society participation is difficult to predict. It does not take the same form all over the world. On the contrary, there are geographical differences.

3.3.1 Social movements in the Arab world

In the Middle East and North Africa, scholars like Joel Beinin and Frédérik Vairel have criticized a tendency to ignore tendencies emerging from the region. The theory of social movement (SMT) has been developed globally through analyzing the mobilization forms seen in emerging democracies, for example in South America. Lessons from South American civil rights movements are then put onto the Arab states. But the movements in the Arab region look different and come from a different political context. They may therefore not fit into the mold made from other experiences, though they should still be interpreted and analyzed as social movements.

In addition, Beinin and Vairel argue that SMT places too much weight on the “binary categories of opposition or collaboration” 25 These are not necessarily the only two options available. Instead, the region is a place of multiple “weapons of the weak”, such as silent

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refusals, bypassing of authority, day-today forms of resistance, and evasion of power practices.26

3.3.2 Civil society in Egypt
Despite the prevalence of authoritarian regimes, civil society participation has deep roots in Egypt and comes in several forms. Inherent in Islam is the tradition of giving back to the community and there are many Islamic charity organizations active in Egypt, aiming at the provision of services from houses of worship.27 The Coptic Church similarly embodies the value of charity and has a long tradition for providing aid programs and services. Despite recent government crackdown on organizations, there is both the opportunity and tradition for civil participation. The 2014 estimate places the number of civil society organizations, also called non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in Egypt at approximately 40,000.28

The World Bank has established the most common definition of an NGO as “private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development”.29 NGOs in Egypt serve a multitude of functions and as their large number implies, they have very different tasks and missions. Asef Bayat lists some hypotheses as to why we see this contradiction, government restrictions as well as a seemingly flourishing civil society. Firstly, the organizations are needed because of the state’s lacking ability of providing the necessary services for its citizens. For a country like Egypt, ridden with economic difficulties and high unemployment, a sector that provides aid and support is welcomed. When the state is struggling with budget deficits and cuts money from social services, NGOs can play a role in providing these services to those in need, giving them a social safety net.30 Secondly, the voluntary sector has support from all the ranges of the political spectrum, that is, both the conservative and liberal political wings.31 The NGOs provide social meeting points for all types of people, connect them, and create jobs and skill building. Thirdly, the regimes of the Middle East and North Africa see NGOs as less threatening when compared with Islamist organizations that they often presume to have

26 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
questionable agendas. A clear sign of this in Egypt is that after the removal of president Mursi in 2013, many organizations and charities run by the Muslim Brotherhood were closed by the new regime.

### 3.4 Challenges of humanitarian aid

In addition to define the organizations run by Syrian refugees in Cairo, and providing the organizations’ own view on what motivates them to provide their services, this thesis also aims at explaining the challenges and obstacles on running organizations. The World Bank’s definition of an NGO focused on providing services and to promote the interests of their beneficiaries. In addition, as they are non-governmental, they must of course try to remain independent. One of the challenges for NGOs is exactly the combination of these principles, namely the non-overlap of being independent while assuring a smooth flow of funding. Often NGOs’ funds come from government sources or other donors with their own interests. The relationship with donors, especially for small organizations, can often be a difficult balancing act. NGOs, dependent on a continued and steady flow of money can succumb to the pressure of adjusting their services to what the donor wishes to see implemented as a service.

Particularly in an environment of many actors, both international NGOs (abbreviated as INGOs) as well as local organizations, the competition for funds can lay the ground for what services are offered.

#### 3.4.1 Growth and changes

Kim Reimann describes the changes that have occurred in this sector and links them with the historical background. In the 1980s and 1990s, the third sector was under rapid growth, tripling in available funds from decade to decade. Both states and international agencies emphasized their significance as saviors that could promote democracy, human rights and sustainable development. This view has since shifted and several criticisms have been brought forth. This was caused especially by the failure in Rwanda and Somalia in the mid 90s, after which the third sector as a whole met criticism for doing more harm than good.

This criticism addressed issues such as ensuring effectiveness in meeting proposed goals,
remaining neutral and not support warring sides, as well as maintaining independence from donors and keeping autonomy intact.\textsuperscript{37}

In addition to increased dependency on donors and challenges of autonomy, Michael Barnett sees a related problem. He underlines the humanitarian organizations’ shift from neutral, philanthropic actors to increasingly political and professionalized participants in global development. The humanitarian field started out as a provider of relief and palliative care for those at immediate risk.\textsuperscript{38} Their employees were mainly inexperienced people with a “can-do attitude and good intentions”.\textsuperscript{39} Barnett investigates the change from this to today’s specialized organizations with codes of conduct, standardized relief activities and focus on donor accountability. The reasons for these changes are several. Firstly, he, like Kim Reimann, points to the important failures such as Rwanda. Secondly, humanitarian crises were on the world agenda after the end of the Cold war. States were increasingly committed to intervening as they saw humanitarian emergencies as a threat to global security.\textsuperscript{40} This has forced the humanitarian organizations to establish organizational structures and to streamline their provision of services, increasing their institutionalization and building their internal structure. In this way they can work in a more organized fashion to respond to increased demand. Secondly, their operations often being of the costly sort, they have to respond to the donors’ increased demand for accountability and reporting. This escalates the demand for administrative structures, to be able to account for the money spent, and develops a corporate, business-like culture: “Rising concerns with efficiency in getting “deliverables” to “clients” hinted of a growing corporate culture; participants increasingly worried about protecting their “brand” and referring to the field as an “industry,” a “business,” a “sector,” and an “enterprise.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{3.4.2 “Paternalistic, unsuccessful, prone to surveillance”?\textsuperscript{42}}

These and other criticisms of NGOs are easily found on the ground also in the Arab region. Asef Bayat describes Arab NGOs as paternalistic, unable to advance development, prone to government surveillance and pressure and lastly, distanced from the grass-root.\textsuperscript{43} The government’s fear of losing control makes it prone to allowing the NGOs that offer merely

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 39–40.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” \textit{Perspectives on Politics} 3, no. 4 (December 2005): 724, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1537592705050401.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 725.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 726.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 725.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” 17–18.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
basic services, such as food, financial aid and educational services. These are issues the government should be involved in and care for, but are not always able or willing to. The NGOs stepping in and offering such aid is therefore welcomed.\(^{44}\) The situation is different for NGOs doing advocacy, human rights monitoring and preaching women rights.\(^{45}\) This is the contradiction faced by the NGOs: they are needed, but controlled if they venture outside the scope of service providing. The government solution is to outlaw all, except for those that provide basic aid to their beneficiaries and do not involve in more risky services.

Bayat reproaches them for this; NGOs should attempt to create development and to make themselves increasingly redundant, mobilizing the grass roots, not merely conforming to the governments in the regimes they are registered under and offering basic aid.\(^{46}\)

However, others have noted the upsides to small, local NGOs. Elizabeth Ferris has particularly studied faith-based organizations in development countries and their challenges competing with larger international organizations. The strength of the Southern NGOs is that they have strong community bonds, and are dedicated to the populations they are helping.\(^{47}\) This makes them devoted to staying for the long haul, not leaving or shifting focus when the emergency part of the operation is over. In spite of this, they often lose in the race for funding because of reporting and accountability demands. For these smaller organization, Barnett’s institutionalization has not yet reached the level international donors are comfortable with.

In conclusion, the building of organizations can take many forms, from small, ad-hoc initiatives, to fluid informal groups demanding rights, and more formalized NGOs. All these types of organizations are found in Egypt and in the Arab region in general, despite government crackdown. The organizations provide important services to the population, whether they are secular or religious in nature. Besides the regional context, organizations and groups are influenced by the sector in which they are working, which is experiencing increased institutionalization and competition for funds.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 17.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{46}\) Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East.”
4 Background: Who are the Syrians? Start of the influx to Egypt
The Syrian uprisings in the period known as the Arab Spring started with full effect in March 2011. The response from the Syrian government and security forces varied between brutal crackdown, arrests and concessions to pacify the demonstrators. Four years later the conflict has escalated into a full civil war, complicated by the presence of Islamist fighters in Northern Syria and a divided UN unable to play a constructive role in the negotiations.

On the UNHCR’s webpage with interregional response overview for Egypt, we see that the first gentle trickling of Syrian refugees staring in July 2012.48 January the following year their number started increasing, reaching 100 000 by September 2013.49

The UNHCR draws a picture of who these refugees are in their Joint Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Egypt, published in November 2013.50 Their information is also strengthened by Maysa Ayoub and Shaden Khallaf’s study by the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo, published September 2014.51

4.1 A typical Syrian in Cairo?
As a group the Syrians in Cairo appear to be quite homogenous. A typical Syrian residing in Egypt is from the capital Damascus (71.9%) and arrived with the family, headed by a male (93%).52 They are Sunni Muslim (99.7 %) and identify as Arab (99.4%).53 They are settling in the larger cities such as Cairo, Giza and Alexandria (41.9%), but are also arriving to smaller cities such as Damietta and Dakhlia (41.3%).54 For the journey they spent US$ 500-2000 and went through a country of transit before reaching Egypt, typically Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey.55 The most common reasons for choosing Egypt in the first place was the perceived low cost of living compared with Syria’s neighboring countries as well as the friendly attitude of the Egyptians.56 These expectations were only to some extent met, as the majority of respondents cite low income and problems finding affordable housing as their

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49 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 13–14.
53 Ibid., 16.
54 Ibid., 19.
55 Ibid., 16–17.
56 Ibid., 17.
main concerns after arriving, as well as lack of protection. The study also reveals that a larger number of children under 18 years are working in Egypt, compared with in Syria. In addition, the large number of arrived Syrians has put an end to the initial welcoming attitude of many Egyptians.

There are political bonds as well as historical ties between Egypt and Syria, which may partly explain the initial welcoming attitude of Egyptians. Traditionally, the refugees coming to Egypt have been from African states located south and southeast of Egypt, with different cultural backgrounds from the Egyptians. The Syrians however, are culturally closer, sharing religion, ethnicity and language with the Egyptian people. This can help explain the bonds between the two. In addition, this is not the first wave of Syrian migration to Egypt. Both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Syrian traders started businesses and workers found jobs in the blooming Egyptian cotton export. During President Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s rule, the two countries were united in the United Arab Republic from 1958-61, as part of the president’s ambition to create a larger pan-Arab state, unifying the Arab countries.

### 4.2 “The events of June 30”

The initial welcoming attitude was not only from the Egyptian people. The former Egyptian president Mohammed Mursi also sided strongly with the Syrian people. Syrians have always been exempt from applying for a visa before entering Egypt. Syrian refugees could therefore get a visa valid for three to six months upon arrival. Syrian children were also allowed to enter Egyptian schools and approach Egyptian hospitals, a service no other refugee group gets. In a public speech June 2013, President Mursi expressed his support for the Syrian people and the Free Syrian Army and closed the Syrian embassy in Egypt as a show of support with the armed struggle against president Bashar al-Assad. Many have claimed that the consequence of this support was a quick deterioration of the Syrians’ wellbeing in Egypt. At this point, many Egyptians’ discontent with the president had reached a breaking

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57 Ibid., 30.
58 Ibid., 26–27.
59 Ibid., 20.
60 Ibid., 19.
61 An informant, Rami in Tadamon Faysal, used this phrasing to describe the ousting of President Mursi.
64 The Free Syrian Army is a group of defected officers and soldiers fighting against the government forces.
66 Ibid.
point and on June 30 2013 a mass protest erupted in Cairo and all major cities. July 3 2013 the military took over and deposed the president. Already five days after the takeover, new visa requirements were issued for Syrians entering Egypt and travellers were turned away after having entered Egyptian territory.\textsuperscript{67} The reason given by the transitional government was the deteriorating security situation as struggles to get control over President Mursi’s adversaries continued.\textsuperscript{68} In front of the Presidential palace, his followers continued to protest and several news outlets reported that Syrians were among them.\textsuperscript{69} President Mursi’s support for the Syrian cause had translated into rumors that they were Brotherhood members and responsible for the violent attacks on security personnel outside the Raba’a square, interfering in Egyptian politics.\textsuperscript{70} The media framing them as terrorists led to widespread harassment, and Syrians were forced out of their homes and jobs.\textsuperscript{71}

4.3 The current situation

After the introduction of visa requirements and security checks, the influx of Syrians trickled to a halt. The peak of registrations with the UNHCR occurred at the end of 2014 and the number has remained mainly stable, slightly sinking, as people are leaving the country.\textsuperscript{72} Arbitrary arrests of Syrians not registered as refugees with the UNHCR have continued as a security measure. The increased media pressure, as well as economic hardship and arbitrary arrests led to an increase of irregular migration from the Mediterranean shores.\textsuperscript{73} According to UNHCR numbers, 6000 migrants, mainly Syrians, arrived to the Italian coast from Egypt between January-September 2013.\textsuperscript{74} In the same period, 1500 persons were detained on the way by Egyptian security forces.\textsuperscript{75} After the removal of President Mursi, the Syrian embassy in Cairo reopened. Despite this, renewal of passports and residency permits remains very difficult and most Syrians trying to leave by the sea have an expired passport or an expired visa.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{68} Maysa Ayoub and Shaden Khalaf, “Syrian Refugees in Egypt,” 22.
\textsuperscript{69} Amnesty International, ‘We Cannot Live Here Anymore’. Refugees from Syria in Egypt,” 2–3.
\textsuperscript{71} Marroushi, “No Haven for Syrian Refugees in Egypt.”
\textsuperscript{72} United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response Egypt.”
\textsuperscript{73} Maysa Ayoub and Shaden Khalaf, “Syrian Refugees in Egypt,” 23.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
Egypt is per now not admitting more Syrians to enter Egyptian territory. A result of this is many divided families, as some families separated in Syria or elsewhere, expecting to reunite again later. Family reunion is not permitted in these cases. Obtaining visas for Syrians is also an increasingly time consuming procedure. Many of my informants said that renewing a visa was a difficult matter, taking up to two months to renew a permit valid for three. According to Ayoub’s study, UNHCR officials confirm this. They meet Syrians with visas of different kinds, some renewable and others not, for periods varying from three to six months, without explanation as to why these distinctions are made. Not having a valid permit sets families at risk of arrest and deportation. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have criticized Egyptian authorities for deporting Syrian refugees to Syria, as well as arbitrarily arresting them because of expired residency permits.

As per 30 November 2015, the number of Syrian refugees registered by the UNHCR is somewhat stabile at 123,000 individuals.

4.4 Syrian organizations in Egypt

It is difficult to assess how many Syrian organizations are active in Egypt. New groups are formed continuously and no one seems to have a complete overview, not even the organizations themselves. I have met with members of five Syrian organizations, all run and/or led by refugees, and all have started up after 2011, when the Syrian influx to Egypt began. Four of them are new organizations, while one is a Syrian-led branch of an originally Sudanese organization. I will present some characteristics of their work and internal structure in the following.

4.4.1 Syria Tomorrow Relief Foundation

Syria Tomorrow (му’ассасат сўриа ал-ғадд ли-л-іғға) was established in 2011, making it the oldest of the organizations. While studying at the University of Medicine in Cairo, the leader Abd al-Hamid and some fellow students grew concerned by the arrival of Syrians and

78 Ibid.
79 Mostafa, Interview by author.
82 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response Egypt.”
therefore formed the organization as a voluntary aid group. Syria Tomorrow is now the biggest of the Syrian organizations, it has 10 000 registered beneficiaries and runs an elementary school for 900 pupils. Several branches, in Doqqi, Downtown Cairo, Obour and 6th October City, service their beneficiaries. 30 employees and over 300 volunteers help run the organization, which is managed by the CEO as well as a board of directors. Each branch is responsible for implementing and organizing activities and projects, while the main office in Doqqi is the executive branch, handling the long-term planning of the organization as a whole, PR and funding.

Syria Tomorrow promotes itself as an independent relief organization. Their different areas of operation include direct aid such as distribution of clothes, school supplies, blankets, medicines and help providing housing. They are also involved in employment projects and have awareness campaigns and regular activities. They organize theatre evenings, a cinema club for children and art therapy. They cooperate with all sorts of organizations, from Doctors Without Borders (known by the French abbreviation MSF in Egypt) who work with delivering emergency medical aid, to CARE International, a humanitarian agency for ending global poverty, as well as smaller Egyptian organizations.

4.4.2 Syrian Emergency Team (SET)
Located in a 3-room apartment building in 6th October City, the Syrian Emergency Team (SET) is close to the big majority of the Syrians in Cairo. A young organization started up in 2013, their registration and leadership is technically under the Syria Tomorrow organization, which also takes care of some of their expenses. Their lack of substantial funding makes them dependent on their 48 volunteers; they have no paid staff. A General Council of six elected members lead the team. The General Council is the highest organ, responsible for planning and dividing the work. Underneath them, the General Assembly elects members from the volunteers who wish to be more involved. Their responsibilities are showing up at events, doing house visits and trainings for the others. Their funding needs are small because they get all essential labor from volunteers and Syria Tomorrow pays their rent and utility bills. The little they do need, they get from benefactors in Egypt. They are also trying

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83 Abd al-Hamid, interview by author. Cairo, 23rd February 2015
84 Osman, Interview by author, Cairo, February 19, 2015.
to start cooperation with embassies to become more financially independent from their head organization.\textsuperscript{85}

In their activities they focus on education, with classes for both children and adults in English, French, Arabic, Math, drawing, recitation of the Quran, and human development. They also collect medications to be donated to people who can’t afford to pay for them. They have clothes sales and offer psychosocial support through fun arrangements, events and house visits. They also cooperate with nearby organizations such as MSF and Save the Children, the NGO for children’s rights.

4.4.3 Souriat Association
Souriat Association was established in 2012. The name means "Syrian women" and as the name suggests it is an organization for women, run by women. The organization is registered and officially led by the Arab Organization for Human Rights, an Arab NGO with 22 branches working for insurance of human rights and advocacy in 19 countries and territories.\textsuperscript{86} Their daily manager is Jan Abaza.

Souriat employs women in especially difficult circumstances, in need of making money. They have three projects: teaching handicrafts (crochê, knitting and sewing) hair dressing and cooking. Each skill has a teacher and an assistant, and after the women master the skill, they can make products they can potentially sell, to make money both for the center and the woman’s family. They distribute their crafts on bazars and cater food to other organizations. In addition they have English classes for women and children and organize awareness sessions, discussion groups and psychosocial therapy.

Up until the winter of 2014 they were receiving funding from the UNHCR and were running all projects with 22 paid employees. At the time of my visit, the organization’s future was uncertain because of the lack of stable funding, and because of cooperation problems with the AOHR. They had let almost all employees go and the main leadership was considering other ways of funding and running the organization.

4.4.4 Tadamon
Tadamon (meaning solidarity) is an Egyptian-Sudanese organization started up by refugees and involved in community work for all refugees in Cairo. They have five different centers in different areas of the capital. Some of them are specialized for a particular refugee group

\textsuperscript{85} Mostafa, Interview by author.
gathered in the area, but all accept also other refugees to enter and use their services.87 The two centers working specifically with Syrians are located in 6th October City in the outskirts of Cairo, and in Faysal, an area close to the pyramids in Giza. Syrians run both centers. Tadamon is supported by the UNHCR and has like Souriat, recently experienced a cut in funding. Each Tadamon office is in charge of their specific activities, but also in continuous contact with the main department and Tadamon’s leader, Fatima Idriss.88

Tadamon Faysal has been operational since autumn 2013. Faysal area only has a modest number of Syrians, compared with an area like 6th October City. But this also means that the Syrians that do live there have been somewhat neglected, without support from any organization, until the creation of this Tadamon branch. The founders discovered that in Faysal area, around 100 Syrian children are working or spending their days inside, not attending Egyptian schools.89 They therefore wanted to focus on this educational aspect and offer classes in all subjects for these children. They also have a kinder garden, activities for adults, English classes, sewing and coexistence sessions, informing the Egyptians in the area about the situation for the Syrians, and vice versa. After the cut back of the funds, they could no longer afford salary for their 12 employees. Some of them left the organization entirely; others have stayed on as unpaid volunteers. The remainders now run the center, teaching all courses and handling activities while trying to obtain new funding from embassies. One of their new initiatives is a microcredit project in cooperation with the Swiss Embassy.

Tadamon 6th October is in the same financial situation as the other Tadamon branch, of having reduced capacity, reduced number of volunteers and not knowing where rent will come from the next few months. They used to have 300 volunteers and several employees, able to take on large projects in cooperation with organizations like CARE, MSF and Save the Children. They now have between 20-30 volunteers and three employees and have had to reduce their services.

They offer social and psychological support, attempting to restore some normality to the children’s lives through fun excursions, activities and events.90 They also give intensive courses in English, math and Arabic for both children and adults, and run a kinder garden. They distribute bags of food, blankets and heaters, advocate for special cases with the

87 Interviews with Maysa Ayoub and Shirin in Tadamon 6th October.
88 Rami, Interview by author, Cairo, February 26, 2015.
89 Ibid.
90 Shirin, Interview by author, Cairo, March 2, 2015.
UNHCR and work with coexistence and job creation, teaching skills like cooking and handicrafts.

4.4.5 Hamzat al-Khatib Charity Association

The last of the organizations I will describe is Hamzat al-Khatib Charity Association (mū’assat ḥamzat al-khaṭīb). The association’s name refers to the first child martyr killed by the Syrian government after a demonstration in Darʿā and has become a known symbol of the early signs of brutality by the regime after the start of demonstrations in the country. Hamzat al-Khatib works especially for aiṯām, children with only one parent caring for them. This is usually the mother, but not in all cases. The organization also takes in some families of two caregivers if they are especially in need. Because the founder, Ahmad Kseibi, is an engineer running a software company in Egypt, he uses the engineering office also as the front of the organization and has customers and refugees registering in the reception with the same secretary. He and a board of directors are in charge of the internal organization, while most of his staff is also employed in the engineering side of the office. This way the organization is run without salary expenses for employees, but at the same time not dependent on volunteers showing up.

Children are the focus of their work, as they are the most vulnerable during such times of conflict and most in need of help. They have registered on file 400 individuals, with comprehensive details of the family’s needs and wishes, outlining what they are in need of and what they wish from the organization. They have two offices, the main one is in Nasr City, and a smaller office in 6th October City is run by a coordinator also working for the engineering office. Both branches give English and computer classes and also organize “fun days”, events on special occasions like Mother’s Day and Muslim religious holidays, visit parks and so on.

To sum up, it is clear that the reception of Syrians to Egypt is different today compared with the start of the influx. The large number of Syrians arriving, as well as their perceived involvement in Egyptian politics has made the situation difficult for the Syrian refugees. Protection from arbitrary arrests is a main concern for the group. But despite their limited

91 Ahmad Kesibi, Interview by author, Cairo, February 14, 2015.
92 Several informants in the organizations used the expression “fun day” in English, though speaking Arabic. It seems to have become an expression.
civil rights, the Syrians have started several organizations providing aid and support. The next chapter will present the Syrian organizations in more detail to determine what type of organizations they are running.
5 Defining the Syrian organizations

As I mentioned in the theoretical framework, to say that the Syrians are running organizations, as I have done so far, is not precise enough. There are different categories of organizations with different functions and ways of working, from small, community-based initiatives to humanitarian NGOs, with stricter and stricter demands on internal structure and reporting, as described by Michael Barnett. Placing them in the wrong category creates the risk of misunderstanding the purpose of their work. What are the characterizing factors for these organizations? This is what this chapter aims at explaining. It is conceivable that they are colored by their contextual place, being that they are working in the close proximity of other large humanitarian organizations. Like Michael Barnett described, the field of humanitarian aid is increasingly institutionalized.

5.1 What kind of organizations are they running?

There are several potential categories in which to place these organizations. The UNHCR refers to the Syrian organizations as community-based organizations (CBOs) or community centers. If they have a more formalized structure it could be more natural to place them in the category of NGOs. A master thesis similar to mine describes Syrians’ participation in Lebanon. Researcher Frances Smallwood here describes Syrian activists as running “small-scale grass-root activities”. This fits well with the common pattern on social movements in the Arab region, but might not fit with these similar activists in Egypt.

5.1.1 CBO or NGO?

Is CBO an appropriate term for Syrian organizations in Egypt? CBOs are characterized by their wish to improve the life of their community and to advocate for their communities, to find solutions to the problems their community faces. This fits well with Grabska’s study of Sudanese CBOs in Cairo. One of their main achievements was a collective claiming of rights to allow Sudanese children to attend Egyptian schools. They also offered services like day care for children, providing information on policies, offering classes in English language, literacy and computers. Their goal is to empower their communities, to create change, often through advocacy.

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95 Ibid., 37.
Similarly, some of the Syrian organizations in this study have an *advocacy component*, aiming at influencing government policy towards Syrians and give their opinions on what measures should be taken to improve their condition. The organization Souriat had for example conducted meetings with Egyptian ministries, such as the Ministry of Education to advocate for Syrian students cut off from their studies.\(^96\) Not all of the organizations do this however. But all the Syrian organizations are service providers, giving the same type of services as the Sudanese CBOs.

Secondly, another characteristic of a CBO is that the members are residents in the community and should decide everything pertaining to the organization.\(^97\) This makes them community-run. In contrast, most providers of services to refugees in Egypt are large, international agencies, operating in several countries with staff and volunteers from different places and have programs and services for different refugee groups, impoverished Egyptian families and so on. If we follow the example of Sudanese in Cairo, only Sudanese refugees run and work in the Sudanese CBOs, and their services are only for Sudanese, and so on. A CBO is not run by outside leaders in a centralized office, but from inside the community and the community itself decides what issues should be addressed.\(^98\)

This does not seem to fit with the Syrian organizations. First of all, apart from SET, they were all divided in branches. The decisions on what services to implement were not taken locally in the community, but often influenced by the central organization, in meetings with donors, cooperating partners and so on. The services would generally be the same, whether the branch was in Downtown Cairo or in 6th October area. Their leaders were people with special skills, for example in terms of experience running an organization, or high social standing. Although they all were of Syrian nationality, they were not necessarily refugees. Both the leader of SET and Souriat had experience in organizational work, having run an organization before.\(^99\) The leaders of Syria Tomorrow and Hamzat al-Khatib did not have such experience, but instead they had high positions in terms of their work. Ahmed Kesibi is an engineer in charge of his own company and Abd al-Hamid is a doctor. Their higher education could help give them social standing, and respect from their beneficiaries. Neither of these two identified as refugees, just as Syrians living in Egypt.

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\(^{96}\) Jan Abaza, Interview by author, Cairo, March 3, 2015.

\(^{97}\) National Community-Based Organization Network, "What Is a Community-Based Organization (CBO)?"

\(^{98}\) Ibid.

\(^{99}\) Mostafa, Interview by author; Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
In terms of the life inside the organization, Grabska’s Sudanese CBOs often met challenges, especially when creating organizational structures and securing funding, as most donors could not support informal CBOs. In terms of organizational structure and size, Grabska writes that the community organizations could be quite informal and work in an ad-hoc way, or be more formalized operations with clear guidelines in place.100

The Syrian organizations themselves used words like mūʿassasa (foundation) or jamaʿiyya (association) to describe their own organizations. Their funding comes from a variety of sources: other charities, INGOs, embassies, governmental grants, donations from influential individuals and so on. Several informants also underlined to me that they did not have this problem. They were able to get funding from a large variety of sources because they, unlike the CBOs, are registered in accordance with the Egyptian Law on Associations, also called the NGO law, for non-governmental organizations.

Civil society organization or NGO is the second type of category where the Syrian organizations could belong. The Syrian organizations are service-providing organizations, giving many of the same services as large, humanitarian NGOs. This is both in the form of direct aid (such as blankets, heaters, baby formula, school supplies) or cultural and educational programs (such as classes, group therapy and awareness sessions). Abd al-Hamid, head of Syria Tomorrow explained to me: “We are civil organizations, so we will be expected to work on education, alimentary issues and charity”.101 This would place his organization (and he seems to be talking about other organizations here as well) within the definition of an NGO.

5.1.2 Non-movements?
As I have mentioned, in the Middle East and North Africa it is common to talk of a different pattern of organization in civil society. Asef Bayat described fragmented people without clear ideologies and organizational structures, “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary”. As this is a common trend in the region, it could be expected that it would be found in the Syrian organizations in Cairo as well.

100 Katarzyna Grabska, "Who Asked Them Anyway?," 37.
101 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
Beinin and Vairel described that in the Arab region the trend is for groups to have weak formal organization, limited resources and rely on informal networks.\textsuperscript{102} This seems to fit well with Frances Smallwood’s fieldwork among Syrian activists in Lebanon. She describes their structure as “small-scale grass-root affairs”, reliant on informal networks, though some also cooperated with more established NGOs for guidance.\textsuperscript{103} Grabska found a similar reliance among the Sudanese CBOs, because of their difficulties managing the formal organization and obtain sufficient funding.

Similar to how Asef Bayat has described social non-movements, CBOs rise from the community, from the bottom and up. Both groups get the affected people to fight for themselves; they do not recruit influential leaders to preach the cause of the vulnerable. They are without clear leadership and ideology, so instead of forwarding demands they rely on episodic and unplanned collective action.\textsuperscript{104}

There are some small similarities between these social movements and the Syrian organizations’ activism. It was difficult to get a clear picture of exactly how many organizations were active in an area; new groups were created and dissolved in a quick pace. Syrians in a given area seemed to be coming together and organizing together, going into the streets and showing their presence in the areas where they are many. Bayat sees this encroachment on urban space as important for the non-movements. For example, both Syria Tomorrow and Tadamon organized coexistence campaigns, especially from offices operative in areas with quite few Syrians. This was in order to inform the Egyptians in the area of the plight of the Syrians and vice versa. Syria Tomorrow Obour had organized a “Thank you” campaign to show their gratefulness to the Egyptian people for welcoming them.\textsuperscript{105} They had visited Downtown and Nasr City and handed out roses and Syrian sweets in the streets.

However, this is not the same kind of activities as described by Bayat. There are many substantial differences between the Syrian groups and Bayat’s non-movements. The Syrian organizations are invested in operating legally, and being organized in their work, not having a fluid group with short-term goals. Several informants mentioned their registration status with the Egyptian government and even showed me the organizations’ papers. Bayat

\textsuperscript{102} Joel Beinin and Frédérik Vairel, Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa, 6.

\textsuperscript{103} Frances Topham Smallwood, “Refugee Activists’ Involvement in Relief Effort in Lebanon,” Forced Migration Review 2, no. 47 (September 2014): 22.

\textsuperscript{104} Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” 22.

\textsuperscript{105} Fatima, Interview by author, Cairo, March 4, 2015.
describes the activities of the non_movements as small-scale civil justice, which does not fit with the organized service provision of the Syrian organizations.

In addition, the Syrians’ structured leadership, with positions and titles leads me to conclude that these are not non_movements, nor CBO-type grass-root affairs. Neither non_movements nor CBOs typically have a CEO, which was the title of several leaders I met with. Syrian organization members identified with official organizations more than community initiatives and focused on service provision rather than advocacy. One thing the five Syrian organizations had in common was their organized and strict internal structure, a point I will elaborate on in the next section.

5.2 An internal structure

“We want to organize fun days for instance for the children, football games for example. But it needs to be planned, we don’t want to do things in a disorganized fashion.”

Several of my meetings with organizations would begin by calling different extensions of the same phone number, being granted a meeting with the CEO and the economy advisor, handed business cards from the people present and shown proof of legal registration. A topic most frequently rising, apart from their services, would be the organization’s internal structure.

This structure consisted of many elements. Having a CEO, a board of directors, scheduled meetings and elections, a committee deciding who was to be taken in as a member, are all examples from different organizations. All the organizations stated that they saw their internal organization and structure as important for their work. No one expressed the view that they should revolve to simpler ways, shedding the pomp and circumstance to be more fluid or flexible. Even the organization SET, which was not an organization in the name, but a team, was divided in different committees with special tasks.

Ahmad Kesibi in Hamzat al-Khatib explained his organization’s vision accordingly:

The goal is helping the afflicted Syrian families coming to Egypt. Because they are suffering from a horrible situation. Our religious, moral and national duty made us stand with them. But in an organized way, not randomly. With the full knowledge of the Egyptian government and with their supervision.

106 Mostafa, Interview by author.
107 Ahmad Kesibi, Interview by author.
Though he sees helping Syrian families as his “religious, moral and national duty”, this has its boundaries. He still expresses the need for such help to be organized and respecting of Egyptian sovereignty and internal rules.

Why are they so preoccupied with being structured and organized? According to organizational studies of humanitarian actors, this is not the least bit unexpected. I have presented Michael Barnett’s criticism of a new trend in humanitarian agencies: increased institutionalization.

[Int]n the 1990s humanitarianism became a field, with regular interactions among the members, an increase in the information and knowledge that members had to consider, a greater reliance on specialized knowledge, and a collective awareness that they were involved in a common enterprise.  

A new trend emerged, of increased demand on accountability, in a field of actors competing for funds. Barnett argues that the provision of relief has increasingly become a field with ambitions, no longer operating solely for the aid of others, but also wielding their own power. Along with the increase of humanitarian involvement from the early 1990s, came the disaster of Rwanda, after which organizations could no longer state that their mere presence was of good. Donors grew more skeptical, a fact seen clearly in the increased demand on reporting and having administrative structures in place to ensure agreed-upon spending of resources. In order to get funds, organizations had to pay more attention to their own internal structure to be eligible. This trend has also affected smaller NGOs, here as described by SET: “Among the difficulties we encountered is that the donors have weak trust. They don’t see where the money goes.”

Charles Hirschman approaches the subject from a different angle. According to him, the focus the Syrian organizations had on internal structure could be a quest for approval, in the form of respect. As I have explained, his study of different religious communities in the US points to the many facets and uses immigrants can get out of their place of worship. His much-cited conclusion summarizes the immigrant communities’ goals as a search for “refuge, respect and resources”. In the absence of extended family and familiar social networks, the community gives refuge, in the form of meaning and stability. Churches and

109 Both Kim Reimann (2005) and Michael Barnett (2005) present the views on this failure.
110 Mostafa, Interview by author.
other religious centers can also provide a place for social advancement and opportunities, providing status, or respect that is otherwise denied. Even if immigrants have formal rights, they can encounter informal barriers to social groups, friendships and clubs. Their community can therefore create a parallel set of institutions where they can achieve this respect and status. In addition, through providing charity-based services, the religious communities provide resources, practical assistance aimed at solving the material problems many immigrants face. By addressing the immigrants’ need for social networking, as well as their socioeconomic needs, the communities become places to advance socially, and get respect and leadership experience that they may not have had access to in other arenas.

Churches were social communities as well as places of worship, with a variety of associations and groups for men, women, and children. In addition to their educational value and leisure time pursuits, church associations created opportunities for leadership and civic contributions that would not have been possible in the broader community.112

Furthermore, Hirschman states that immigrants will form communities filling these functions even in situations where they are integrated in the majority society, enjoying the same rights as the rest of the population. In the country context of Egypt, this is not at all the case.

My informants mirrored in several ways the thought that Syrian refugees could obtain respect through work and positions in the organizations. Shirin in Tadamon explained that people recognizing her, wanting to talk or ask for advice, often stopped her. For her, this had become a drive and a source of motivation for her work.113 Fatima in Syria Tomorrow, who had been forced to delay her university studies and flee Syria, said: “The experience I have (gotten here) would have taken me ten years to obtain at a university. Working on the ground, not in administration, with the people. When you come here every day you start knowing all the families and what they are like.”114 Instead of lamenting her loss, she put a positive spin on the situation and was grateful for the experience she was getting. Additionally, the prevalence of having titles (CEO, General Council member, daily manager) could also reflect this need for respect. A CEO of an organization is no longer “just a refugee” but has achieved something through his or her participation.

For Syrians, getting respect and experience through these types of organizations could also represent their very first experiences of participating in civil society building. Rana Khalaf writes on Syrian civil society that people only to a very small extent have been able to

112 Ibid., 20.
113 Shirin, Interview by author.
114 Fatima, Interview by author.
participate, due to strict government control. It is therefore likely that most Syrians that choose to be involved in relief work of any sort start with a blank slate; they will not have previous experience or be influenced by trends from the Syrian country context. My informants also mirror this. Only two people out of the 25 I spoke with had experience from working in an organization in Syria. One had run an “illegal, underground embroidery club” and one a football association. Everyone else stated that they had no experience or, like this informant in SET, only experience with more informal, individual work for example organized by the families in the neighborhood:

-Do you have any previous experience?
-Individual work and with the families in the area. Not organized by any organization or by the state. But I did individual, volunteer work, for God. No one there [in Syria] told us to do these things. The Syrian government didn’t teach us to do good to people.

5.2.1 A quest for respect?
Hirschman’s theory of refuge, respect and resources might explain the Syrian organizations’ need for structure and internal organization. As members of successful NGOs, the individual can escape the somewhat negative “refugee label”. Instead, they can be individuals working for the benefit of their communities. Furthermore, they can get respect and recognition from their communities by participating and advancing internally. Through the organizations what Hirschman calls “opportunities for leadership and civic contributions” are realized. This has not been possible inside Syria and represents completely new possibilities.

The possibilities for internal advancement are seen in different ways in the Syrian organizations I met with. The leader of Souriat explained that she held official interviews to pick employees for the organization, choosing a teacher and an assistant for each project. The branches of Tadamon and Syria Tomorrow were more volunteer-based and worked divided in different committees. Within the organization tasks were divided into sub sections with a responsible person for each section. These sections could be different services for the beneficiaries, like outreach, education, livelihood and protection. They also had sections to control the more administrative sides of the work, like PR, head of volunteers and

115 Jan Abaza, Interview by author; Mostafa, Interview by author.
116 Often the Arabic phrase ‘amal fardī (individual work) was used.
117 Tarek, Interview by author, Cairo, February 19, 2015.
reception. Some people were hired specifically for a post, but others were long-term members given extra responsibility as head of a section. In SET, the members decide who they wanted to be part of the internal running of the organization. They have different committees and to become a member, volunteers run for election. At the top there is an administrative board, with elected members. Then there is the General Assembly and then the rest of the volunteers.

It [The General Assembly] exists because we have a lot of volunteers. We choose from them to be a part [of the assembly]. Around 14, out of maybe 40 volunteers. To be in it you have to do two things: to nominate yourself to the administrative board and to get enough votes from the others so you are elected. These members have to participate with the board in the important issues. You have to commit to being present for meetings, participate in committees, visit houses and so on. For the volunteers, all we demand from them is to come to events and help put. This is the difference between the three. The General Assembly has now been formed and elections will occur soon.

These examples suggest that there is a way forward for social advancement internally in the organizations. Anyone who wished to invest their time were potential leadership material, as long as they could get the other members’ or leaders’ support, either through elections or formal interviews. This way they could get recognition and respect from their own, which seems to fit Hirschman’s theory.

An immediate objection to applying Hirschman’s theory of the American religious communities to the Syrian NGOs in Cairo is obviously that the Syrian organizations are not religious communities. This is quite a large difference, as the Syrian organizations were quite adamant about their lack of religious affiliation (more on this in chapter 6). I will still claim Hirschman’s theory can be applied. He writes that “if immigrants cannot find a church or temple with their religious traditions, and preferably in their mother tongue, the American custom is to start one of their own.” But what if they do find religious communities of their own? Most (99.7%) of the Syrians in Egypt identify as Sunni Muslims, the same religion as the overall Egyptian majority. During rituals in the mosque the two groups

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119 Both Rami in Tadamon and Omar in Syria Tomorrow mentioned this my interviews.
120 Yusuf, Interview by author, Cairo, February 19, 2015.
would follow the same rituals, read the same holy Quran in the same language. The Egyptian mosques are therefore at their disposal, without the need of adapting to a foreign way of worship. This might eliminate the Syrians’ need of establishing religious communities: Their place of worship is available.

5.3 Conclusion
The Syrian organizations are addressing all services Hirschman has found in American religious communities, except for providing a center of worship. All organizations offered language courses, in addition to other relevant classes, such as computer classes. The biggest organization, Syria Tomorrow, is running a whole school. All of them also address material needs, with regular campaigns distributing blankets, baby formula and Ramadan sacks of food. Some worked especially with job placement, like Tadamon and Souriat. Syria Tomorrow particularly invested time and money in housing vulnerable women. Finally, all their organization offices were places to meet, where the users of the organizations could talk, exchange information and form personal relationships.

Yet, the Syrian organizations do not seem to be community centers or grass-root movements; their leaders are influential, experienced people, who implement services they see the need for. These are not bottom-up organizations. The mantra of the organizations was often precisely that they were very organized and structured and they seemed to put pride in this. Through their strict organizational structure they can get respect from their communities and appear competent and institutionalized. This might help them vis-à-vis other humanitarian agencies, especially to make them eligible for funding. The next chapter will show how the organizations present their services and the reasons they give for choosing them.
6  The motives of the Syrian organizations

When Grabska met with Sudanese organization members she found that they could give clear reasons for choosing their specific services, aimed at fostering independence, self-reliance and creating skills that could be useful for income-generating work. Do the Syrian organizations have equally clear reasons for operating? The Sudanese members meant that the international agencies were not meeting their needs nor giving them the services they wanted. Maybe the Syrian activists are equally determined to fill a gap in services? Or does their NGO status make them distanced from the grass-root and unable to build development, as Bayat has gloomily predicted? This chapter will explain the motives the Syrian organizations gave for their choice of activities and why they were active. I have illustrated each motive with examples especially from one organization. This, however, does not mean it is unique only for that case. On the contrary, I have chosen the trends and attitudes most frequently mentioned and that were visible in all the organizations I visited. What do the organizations wish to accomplish for their beneficiaries by their activities and participation?

6.1  A new social structure: Souriat

“They all live without their families, so this becomes like a family. They said we don’t want to lose this, it’s quite important for us that when we are depressed we can come here.”

Souriat Association was established in 2012 and is specifically centered on helping women; teaching them skills such as handicraft, hairdressing and cooking to make products for sale: “Here at Souriat we liked the idea that there are a lot of women who are sitting at home, feeling depressed that can come here and learn for free and do it [handicrafts] at home and it can be a way of income for them.”

In addition, they organize awareness sessions and discussion evenings. They offer no material aid and instead refer to the UNHCR partner organizations. The last two years they have been receiving support from the UNHCR and were able to have over 20 employees and run a variety of projects. This year, the support has been cut and at the time of my visit the future was uncertain because of the lack of stable funding.

6.1.1  Creating a new family

Several organizations spoke of this creation of a new social network, or even a family. Having lost their families in extreme cases, and in any case, being uprooted, forced to move

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123 Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
124 Mona, Interview by author, Cairo, March 3, 2015.
to a new country, the need for a new form of social belonging was underlined. Many Syrian families in Egypt are in the situation of having their immediate family in another country. Their need for social belonging might be exaggerated by there being no improvement on the way: many Syrian families in Egypt are unable to reunite with their relatives since Egypt does not have family reunion as an option.  

Shirin in Tadamon 6th October also mentioned to me a different reason for Syrians seeking social interaction: that they have not necessarily had a lot of contact with people from different areas or cities. She told me that by being in Egypt she had met people from different places in Syria that she had never visited, due to the difficulties of travelling around.  

In Cairo, they are all gathered in the same place and this made it easier to meet different people, creating new networks. In addition, in order to get the most out of services, it was important to have a good atmosphere within the organization, like Fatima from Syria Tomorrow Obour said: “Before we started any activities or anything we had to create a good atmosphere, like a family.”

It is not so uncommon that the purpose of the work in an organization is divided, filling different social and psychological demands simultaneously. Researchers Bankston and Zhou divide the purposes of Vietnamese Catholic churches in the US into latent and manifest. Their manifest purpose is to provide a place of worship, while the latent purpose is to create a social meeting place; bringing people together means they can share information and find economic opportunities. It is seen as common among the immigrant religious communities in the US that they make great efforts in serving the social and economic needs of their followers. Immigrants are a group with many needs and few resources, and may therefore especially find use in an organization that caters to their diverse needs. The researchers also found that the community could function as an “extended family” and “provide an anchor” for the immigrants.

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125 This issue was brought up to me in interviews by the organization members themselves, UNHCR representatives and a human rights lawyer.
126 Shirin is in her early twenties and from Aleppo.
127 Fatima, Interview by author.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 6.
6.1.2  *Rebuilding social structures*

I have defined the organizations as civil society organizations offering different services. Their services varied, from cultural and educational projects, to material aid and short-term campaigns. Some of these services, like vocational training, running kinder gardens and after-school services for children, resemble welfare services more than charity; they are building a network around the beneficiaries. This is similar to what a state would do, and is understood by Asef Bayat as a direct result of a weak public sector, not able to cater for the needs of the population.132 Abd al-Hamid in Syria Tomorrow similarly explained this focus with the lack of a state or even embassy caring for the interests of the Syrians: “When there is no country that cares about this issue, the responsibility is shifted and put on the civil society organizations carrying the responsibility”.133

Another indication of the organizations taking on such responsibility is the long-term aspect of their services. In Souriat for example, the main project was creating sustainable job opportunities for their followers. The activities (cooking, handicrafts and hairdressing) would result in products and these could be sold. This made them draw their beneficiaries in, through weekly course dates, slowly building up proficiency in the chosen craft. It also made the organization into a social meeting place, where women could meet and exchange news and advice on daily life in Cairo. This is in accordance with Charles Hirshman’s findings as well, who describes the process of community centers turning into places of social interaction and building family-like structures within the community. He quotes a study on small, Korean churches in New York described as places for “extensive social interaction after services as well as celebrations for holidays, and birthday parties for children and the elderly—operating as an extended family for many Korean immigrants.”134 Similarly, a study on Catholic communities in the Protestant US underlines the importance of creating a “social structure to protect the Catholics from the dominant and hostile Protestant environment.”135 Hostility towards Catholics pushed the group into creating sheltered communities as a place of refuge.

It can be discussed whether the Syrian organizations in fact managed to create a family-like structure. Whether the beneficiaries saw the organizations as their extended family I am not in a position to say, as I have not spoken with them. Only the statements of the organizations

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132 Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” 17.
133 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
135 Ibid., 20.
themselves suggest that they succeed in this. However, it seems clear that for example Souriat functioned as a social meeting place, in addition to being a place of available services. This is demonstrated through the range of activities happening in their organization. They arranged clubs on fixed days, classes the beneficiaries would have to sign up for and more sporadic awareness sessions, repeatedly drawing beneficiaries into their venues. This made their organization the place to go to and ensured the beneficiaries’ return.

Equally, their high number of beneficiaries demonstrates their family-like standing. The organization had venues in two places in Cairo where, to my knowledge, there were no other organizations active. This meant their services were without competition and made them the only option for Syrians living in the areas.

Maybe the Syrian organizations’ wish to create a “new family” was ultimately a way of rebuilding missing social structures? The long-term aspect on their services points to this. There is a clear difference between giving blankets and medication on the one hand, and organizing classes and running schools and kinder gardens on the other. This second type of services requires building up a group of followers that come to rely on the presence of the organization. In addition, it places a responsibility upon the organization, it must plan long-term, make sure it has the facilities, personnel and equipment to conduct classes for the proposed timeframe. This might show that the Syrian organization members are expecting to stay for an extended period in Egypt; they seem to be willing to invest time and resources in building these networks for their beneficiaries.

6.2 Bearing the responsibility: The Syrian Emergency Team (SET)

We make “fun days” for children so that they will have fun and also as a way of connecting them to the Syrian society. We draw the flag of the Syrian revolution on their faces so that they don’t forget and remember that they have a country they need to return to.

The Syrian Emergency Team is situated in 6th October area and is the youngest of the organizations. From the beginning of 2014 they have been steadily growing, under the protection and help from Syria Tomorrow, their main cooperation partner. From their offices, they organize classes for children and adults, in Arabic, English, mathematics, Quran recitation and human development. They arrange clothes fairs, cultural evenings and do

\[136\] Namely 10th of Ramadan and Heliopolis.

\[138\] Mostafa, Interview by author.
surveys of the needs of the Syrians in their area. Another important topic was improving the psychosocial wellbeing for the adults, and to care for the Syrian children affected by the war: “They are far from their country and they need to know someone here can bring them joy. And for the children too, they have experienced war, we want to bring back the joy to the children’s lives.”

6.2.1 For the children
SET did not try to shield the children from the realities of their situation, by organizing fun events and leave the serious topics for the parents or school system. The team would often address the topic of the situation in Syria, talk about the war, the regime and install in the children a sense of national identity. This was seen as their responsibility as an organization. During the fun days they would paint the Syrian flag (the flag of the Syrian revolution in green, white and red) on their faces to remind them of their home country that they needed to return to. This can be seen as part of their long-term plan for the Syrian community: This people will one day have to rebuild their country, if not today’s adults, then their children:

We focus on the educational and intellectual situation of Syrians. Our community is experiencing ignorance, unfortunately, and there has to occur a change in a good way. […] So we focus on raising the intellectual level, talks, discussion, women rights, children’s rights, human rights […] We want to rebuild the homeland with knowledge.

One important issue the organizations dealt with was how to explain the situation for the children, without scaring them. There were different views on this topic as the potentially frail psychological state of the children was a concern shared by many. In Syria Tomorrow Obour, they had held a workshop on managing children’s fears and worries, instructing adults not to discuss politics in front of them because they could get scared. SET however seemed to practice a full-disclosure policy, explicitly telling the children they were at war. In any case, the children could not and were not sheltered from the war and happenings in Syria. Rami in Tadamon Faysal showed me drawings the children had made in their kinder garden that featured the two flags, the red, white and green from before and the new flag of the revolution. They took this to mean that the children belonged to families supporting either President al-Assad or the revolution and this transcended into the children’s drawings, who were fully aware of what side they were on. At the school run by Syria Tomorrow, one of

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139 Yusuf, Interview by author.
140 Mostafa, Interview by author.
141 Sara, Interview by author, Cairo, March 4, 2015.
142 Mostafa, Interview by author.
their main reasons for starting a school in the first place was to address and reduce the children’s psychological wounds from the war:

They have lived in the war for three years, and this has caused some problems. Some are delayed in their studies because they have missed time, when they arrive in the Egyptian schools, they don’t understand anything, we don’t want them to lose more time. As a center we offer them to start from the beginning, even if they are old enough to be in higher grades. The other issue is that they have a lot of psychological issues because of the war. We have special social workers following up with them. We have also worked with CARE and Save the Children with these issues. The third problem is that the children have problems understanding the Egyptian dialect.143

The focus on education was prevalent in all organizations, not only for the children, many also had classes for their own members and for other adults. An English teacher for adults in SET explained to me that she liked teaching so much because it was not a material thing. People who came to the organization often had lost everything they owned, but teaching meant giving something to people that no one could take away from them.144

Still, the main priority for most organizations was to educate the children. The reasons for this were that they often had lost a lot of time in their education, in addition to being burdened with psychological problems. This could harm their future, and conflict with their (potential) future work of rebuilding their country. Abd al-Hamid explained it this way to me:

Look, the political crisis and the war caused a lot of students to be cut off from their education. And if the children did not draw benefit from education in the childhood years... For the future, they are the most important. The personal development of any child or any person happens through education, training, installing culture. The destruction that has occurred and that there has been a war, maybe, God willing it will be better again and we can rebuild destroyed buildings. But if we lost education and our culture, this is more difficult to build up again. In addition, our children have a lot of psychological problems. If we don’t take action now, these psychological problems will get worse in the future and to be honest, it will be a bad future for these children. When they get older, maybe they will steal, maybe terrorism.145

6.2.2 For rebuilding Syria
The starting up and running of the organization led the members of SET to other realizations about the future for Syria. Mostafa described the administrative structures of the organization as an opportunity to show the Syrian community by example how democracy works. With this in mind, they had incorporated democratic principles into the organization, and held elections with ballot boxes and candidates competing for posts in an elected administrative

143 Ibrahim, Interview by author, Cairo, March 4, 2015.
144 Amina, Interview by author, Cairo, February 19, 2015.
145 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
board: “For our team, we held elections and elected a board so we show that we are actually following our own rules and not just saying nice words.”

They were interested in preparing for the return to Syria and especially preparing their children for both the return and the task of rebuilding the country. By using their own organization, they also seemed to be invested in trying to set an example for others, getting a first taste of how a free election might occur. This did not mean they were staring a diaspora political movement. Nor did they express a wish to participate in Egyptian politics or internal Egyptian affairs. It was only inside the organization itself, incorporating democratic principles instead of ruling them from the top.

Mostafa, General Council member of SET, saw democracy within the organization as a way to show in practical terms what it meant to have a democracy, something Syrians have not seen before. By teaching this through the organization he meant to prepare for a time after the return to Syria, without the current regime:

Our goal is the service of all the Syrian people here in Egypt. If the revolution ends tomorrow and this Syrian community in Egypt can return, this community will be true and proper. So they are able to rebuild the country. […] We can help guide the Syrian community to the place we need to be.

It is important to note that SET is not representative for the organizations I met with in this aspect. It was the only organization I met with where the wish to partake in a democracy had such a visible effect on the organization itself. As I have tried to show with interview quotes in this chapter, members of other organizations spoke both of the future rebuilding of the country and of the future for Syria and Syrians. But this was more along the lines of thought experiments than present-day plans put into effect. Their organizations were ruled through majority rule in the board or among the members. No other organization held elections for seats in a council.

Also, internally in SET, there were members that did not agree with these democratic practices. During my visit, an argument broke out over coffee visiting a member of the organization. He was skeptical about the elections in the team because Syrians neither trust the democratic process nor understand the need for it. They see who win and are not interested in participating: “The dictatorship is everywhere in Syria. It runs through our water pipes and all our lives we have been drinking it from the taps.”

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146 Mostafa, Interview by author.
147 Ibid.
148 Basil, Interview by author, Cairo, February 15, 2015.
Mostafa argued that it takes a long time for all countries to get used to the democratic process and that this should not be an argument for not attempting. On the contrary, it was the organization’s responsibility not only to cater for day-to-day needs, but also to participate in this discussion and prepare for the return, with a community made ready for rebuilding a new Syria.

Interestingly, this finding is in accordance with that of Frances Smallwood’s master thesis on the Syrian community in Lebanon. She takes special note of some of the activities set in motion by Syrian group activists, for example workshops about active citizenship and negotiation skills. One of her informants said this:

“These small organisations are the real, first democratic experience that the Syrian youth has had. So these organisations being established now, it’s the first time they’re practising true free democracy, in their thoughts, opinions, political and social leanings, expressing themselves. […] Elections aren’t the real mark of democracy, civil society is the real democracy, that’s being born in these circumstances. […]”

The challenges facing democracy in Syria will not only be linked with the population’s inexperience: also the emergence of radical Islam and increased distrust between sectarian groups. Per today, it seems that an end to the war in Syria is far away and the Syrians may have to remain in Egypt for a long time. It is however interesting that the issue of rebuilding and shaping a new Syria is emerging so early. No organization had plans for integrating their life and their children’s lives in Egypt, only how they could improve their conditions after a return. The Syrian organizations seem to take responsibility for building a strong community. Their optimism and hope for their communities were striking, as were the consideration put into deciding what activities they should offer, with little resources and no previous experience to lean on.

6.3 Offering a long-term plan: Syria Tomorrow

It’s important that the families learn to cope for themselves, because the organization may close one day.

Syria Tomorrow Relief Organization is the biggest Syrian-led organization in Cairo with 10 000 registered beneficiaries, five offices and a primary school for 900 students. The

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150 Ibid., 44.
151 Fatima, Interview by author.
organization was started in 2011 as a volunteer humanitarian aid committee by a group of medicine students and has witnessed both exponential growth as well as a downsizing of branches and activities. Their leader, Abd al-Hamid, describes their work as divided in two types: firstly long-term, humanitarian or educational projects and secondly seasonal projects whose main focus is distributing alimentary aid. The seasonal campaigns are typically providing sacks of food for Ramadan, and supplies for the winter. They also run a school in Obour City, northeast of Cairo, and provide housing for vulnerable Syrian families, typically women with children, and the elderly. They have 16 employees in the organization and the estimated number of volunteers is 200-300 people.

In the Middle Eastern countries, NGOs fill a function of relieving the public sector, according to Asef Bayat. But this does not mean they should be allowed to focus on charity and fulfilling basic needs. NGOs’ overwhelming focus on services and charity can dominate, leaving projects to achieve social and economic rights for their beneficiaries behind. According to Bayat, an important factor to take into account when studying an NGO is to see if it is working to make itself progressively redundant and foster participation. Projects should not be decided by one or two members of staff for the others to implement, but be run bottom-up.

Is the Syrian organizations’ main focus to provide charity? If so, this would mean they are not achieving long-term results for their beneficiaries. I will discuss in chapter 8 whether or not the organizations managed to advocate well for their beneficiaries, which is an important factor for Bayat. But another aspect to take into account is if they managed to make themselves “progressively redundant” by offering services with a long-term aspect. Fatima in Syria Tomorrow Obour told me this aspect always was in the back of her head when planning services:

It’s important that the families learn to cope for themselves, because the organization may close one day. We don’t know what will happen with the Syrians in the future. We who work with housing and social outreach need to keep these things in mind [...] With the children that have experienced war and have psychological problems, it’s important to help them and make them used to the ways and traditions of this new society and teach them to take care of themselves. Many of them have changed their behavior, that they don’t hit each other, talk in loud voices, not behaving in the correct way. These things have started to get better.154

152 Bayat, "Activism and Social Development in the Middle East," 17.
153 Ibid.
154 Fatima, Interview by author.
As most leaders and members of the Syrian organizations are refugees themselves, they should be able to understand and take into account the actual needs of the Syrians in Egypt, not their perceived needs. Either way, when looking at the services the Syrian organizations provide, we see a dual nature in their services. They do provide short-term, basic aid or charity (such as Ramadan sacks of food, baby formula, blankets and heaters). Hamza al-Khatib organization even has the word *charity* in the name. But they also focused on offering services that could be useful for the long-term, such as educational classes, awareness sessions, skill building. Maybe a contradiction in terms, but in addition to offering material aid, they claimed they wished to offer sustainable services that would strengthen the beneficiaries long-term, and not make them dependent on the same aid.

Fatima from Syria Tomorrow Obour for this reason rejected some forms of aid, like financial assistance. She thought this could foster dependency:

> As a Syrian myself, I was surprised by the help offered from the UNHCR. I know the Syrian population as a people that works hard and takes pride in their work. There is no need to change that, rather the opposite; it needs to stay the same. We need to influence the place we are in in a positive way. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone.\(^{155}\)

6.3.1 **Sustainability**

This focus on long-term help is in accordance with the findings of Katharzyna Grabska. She found that Sudanese refugees in Egypt demanded *sustainable* projects for their community, whether it was skill building or income-generating projects. Sudanese community leaders criticized any initiative that didn’t lead to job placement. Even skill building, if it was only a time filler or an educational tool was not seen as productive:

> ‘They are just keeping people busy. They do not make people self sufficient economically.’\(^{122}\) The Sudanese NGO, MAAN, commented that refugees participate in vocational training not because they want to do it, but because they had nothing else to do and they wanted to keep themselves busy. \(^{123}\) For example, the Care with Love program for training in homecare for the elderly, run jointly for refugees and Egyptians, failed to lead to any employment for women. Such training was also seen as taking away from the time to pursue income generating activity.\(^{156}\)

Several Syrian organizations also saw the importance in offering services that could help the community find jobs to support themselves. Popular services in this regard were job placement databases, skill building and vocational training. Souriat collected names of businesses in need of extra hands and attached them with women wanting to work outside the

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\(^{155}\) Ibid.

\(^{156}\) Katharzyna Grabska, "Who Asked Them Anyway?," 42.
house. Their main project was teaching skills and crafts that could be used to make products for sale. Syria Tomorrow Obour had the same projects and identified the main advantage with this type of work: “We also tried making work opportunities, like sewing groups, kitchen groups, selling food outside. Some people are not able to work outside of the organization, so something like sewing is better for them, because you can do it at home.”

Not all women in Egypt (Syrian or otherwise) are comfortable working outside of the home. As Grabska identified in her study with Sudanese, the formal job market is difficult to get access to as a refugee, but the informal market leaves a person vulnerable to abuse and misuse, completely without rights if taken advantage of by the employer. Another option explored by several Syrian organizations (and also by Grabska’s Sudanese communities) was micro credit projects, extensions of small loans. This could help fund the purchase of a business venue, or enable families to buy products for sale.

The most important fact with skill building, according to the organizations, is that it should lead to an income. Souriat claimed they had success with this, though it is hard to say what will happen now the organization seems to be closing. Will the women be able to market their own products without the network and help of the organization? The organizations argued that sewing at home is a safer work choice, as opposed to risking exploitation as workers in the informal economy. But the sustainability of such projects can be debated.

Although there might be some interest in handicraft products, the market will surely be filled quite quickly, whereas the demand for domestic workers, such as baby sitters and housecleaners is quite large and often easily accessible for women of different nationalities in Egypt. However, this type of work involves possible exploitation, especially for those who are not aware of their rights. Syria Tomorrow tried addressing this issue by offering workshops with Egyptian lawyers explaining legal issues. This could be a possible way of opening up a market of work that is more sustainable as there is an actual demand. Women more aware of their rights could perhaps feel safer in this line of work? It is too soon and on too small of a scale to conclude whether these workshops had an effect, but addressing the challenges of the informal market is maybe a better, more sustainable place to start than creating sewing jobs for which the need is uncertain.

157 Fatima, Interview by author.
160 Sara, Interview by author.
6.4 Represent all fractions: Tadamon

- Do you ever discuss politics here?
- Even vegetables discuss politics!\(^{161}\)

Tadamon is a well-known organization in Egypt, as their many branches serve thousands of refugees all over the capital. The two branches run by Syrians are in 6\(^{th}\) October area, which has maybe the largest concentration of Syrians, and in Faysal south in the city, with a much more modest number. Both branches were cutting services at the time of my visit, as the funding from the UNHCR was running out. Both branches provide kinder garden facilities and classes for children not in Egyptian schools, of all ages. They also teach classes in English and sewing. Tadamon Faysal also works extensively on coexistence projects with Egyptians, as the Syrians stand out more in this area where they are few. Tadamon 6\(^{th}\) October focuses on psychosocial wellbeing through activities and events.

The principles of humanitarianism were central to the Syrian organizations. The International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Society has been central in establishing the principles of humanitarianism, through a ten-point Code of Conduct to be respected by organizations working neutrally in conflict situations. Among these principles are neutrality, independence and helping all victims equally, without regard to nationality, creed, race or political and religious affiliation.

Barnett describes the central role of these principles: Without neutrality to the conflict, it would be impossible to reach all victims of a crisis. If the relief organizations took sides in the conflict, how could they be sure to reach the whole population at risk, not scaring away supporters of the opposite side?\(^{162}\)

6.4.1 Non-religious

In accordance with the Code of Conduct, all organizations emphasized their non-religious nature and that they were not affiliated with any belief. They would help Syrians of all faiths and their personal views and beliefs had no place in the work of the organization. Mostafa in SET told me: “As Muslims we don’t have an Islamic affiliation, but we support the creation of the civilized, progressed Syrian society that protects Muslims, secular people and Christians.”\(^{163}\) This is in clear accordance with the humanitarian Code of Conduct, of

\(^{161}\) Nadir, Interview by author, Cairo, March 2, 2015.
\(^{162}\) Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” 724.
\(^{163}\) Mostafa, Interview by author.
impartiality, helping all victims no matter their beliefs or background. Maysa Ayoub also concurred with this from her interviews with Syrians:

- Can you remember if you saw any signs of people belonging to any political groups, or specific religious groups?
- Not in the interviews, they highlighted their identity rather as Syrian more than Syrian shia’ or Syrian Christians.¹⁶⁴

As Maysa Ayoub’s study also found, there was not much need for religious neutrality or open-mindedness: The Syrians in Cairo are almost all Muslim (99.7%).¹⁶⁵ No organization could boast of religious plurality, though some stated they had tried. Jan Abaza in Souriat looked for Syrian Christian women to hire for the organization¹⁶⁶; Fatima in Syria Tomorrow Obour told me that their beneficiaries were “all Muslim. The percentage I think is 90% Muslim. The Christians you will find in Turkey or in Lebanon. There are not a lot of Christians in Syria anyway. Few in Damascus.”¹⁶⁷

At the same time, this did not mean they weren’t preoccupied with religion. For example, most of the organizations that taught classes would include a class in Quran reading. On the other hand, they all worked out of neutral offices, none worked from mosques. None had words like “Islamic” or “religious” in their name. None offered preaching of Islam (da’wa), sermons or focused on religious dialogue. Their focus seemed to be of humanitarian nature, offering services, while religion was left to the local mosque. This could be a matter of lacking competency in religious matters, or a lack of need as per my interpretation of Charles Hirschman’s theory; their religious needs were cared for in the Egyptian society (see 5.2.1 for more on this).

Another reason could be that being a non-religious organization can be very positive when trying to obtain support from foreign organizations. A non-religious organization would be labeled as “secular” in the Western world. This word has very negative connotations in the Arab world, whereas in the West, it is almost instrumental to be perceived as unoccupied with religion in order to be labeled as truly neutral. Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, author of Humanitarian Jihad: Investigation into Islamic NGOs explains this divide:

The very concept of a secular NGO exceeds the understanding of some Islamic humanitarian actors, who find it hard to distinguish between secularism and atheism.

¹⁶⁴ Maysa Ayoub, Interview by author, Cairo, February 9, 2015.
¹⁶⁶ Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
¹⁶⁷ Fatima, Interview by author.
They do not understand (or do not accept) that a humanitarian gesture, whatever its origin, could be made outside the scope of religious values, considering that religion is the guarantor of morals, charity, good behaviour and virtue.\(^{168}\)

He also sees a change in policy after 9/11, firstly from Western governments shying away from funding Islamic NGOs. But also Islamic donors have ceased to give regular funds, afraid of being associated with “organized Islam”.\(^{169}\) Ghandour predicts that Islamic NGOs will solve the problem by seeking funding from “more dubious international Islamic networks”.\(^{170}\) These Syrian organizations have perhaps chosen a different solution: to downplay their religious affiliation altogether. By leaving the subject of religion in their services, they might make themselves more attractive to international donors. As we will see in the next part, another reason makes this a particularly wise move: The link between the Syrian community and internal Egyptian politics.

6.4.2 Non-political
I have mentioned the media spreading rumors about Syrian involvement in the aftermath of June 30 2013, when President Mursi lost power. The Muslim Brotherhood president’s support for the Syrians led to rumors that they in turn were part of the Muslim Brotherhood, invested in Egyptian politics. When discussing this topic with my informants, I would often refer to the ousting of President Mursi as al-Inqilāb (the overthrow or coup). Rami in Tadamon Faysal smiled at the use of this word and explained that as a Syrian he would not say it like this. It implied that the president had been wrongfully forced out of power and was a description of events used only by the Brotherhood and their supporters. He instead spoke of al-Aḥdāt talāṭīn sitta, “the events of June 30”.\(^{171}\)

This could be linked with fear, because the situation for Syrians in Egypt dramatically worsened once the link between Syrian refugees and the Brotherhood was made. By using neutral words, distance is created to the events. I would also link this attitude with a general unwillingness to take side in politics. While openly discussing the political situation in Syria, many organization figures informed me that they had no involvement or even interest in the Egyptian political situation. And though the members spoke amongst themselves about Syrian politics, they were quite adamant about the fact that these opinions were not part of official organization policy.


\(^{169}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{170}\) Ibid.

\(^{171}\) Rami, Interview by author.
This is not a self-evident finding; on the contrary, Michael Barnett claims that the humanitarian organizations’ purposes are increasingly becoming *politicized*, that providing relief is increasingly linked with offering solutions to a political problem: “[A]ny actions that aspire to restructure underlying social relations are inherently political. Humanitarianism provides relief; it offers to save individuals, but not to eliminate the underlying causes that placed them at risk”.

The definition of the work of humanitarian agencies has been that they offer relief without solving the problem that put the persons at risk in harm’s way. But the root of the problem addressed by humanitarian agencies is always political and Barnett argues that some humanitarian actors have been tempted into addressing them as well. The conflict arises when the organizations become emerged in the political side of the conflict. This calls into question the non-governmental side of organizations, as well as their independence and their disengagement from politics. There is a risk inherent in political involvement: If a Syrian organization had been seen as the supporter of one side of the conflict, it would be impossible to reach all beneficiaries in their area and they could be the subject of criticism or slander.

This could help explain why all the organizations took a clear stand when asked about political affiliation. Except for some organizations’ goal to create democracy in Syria, which can be said to be a political goal, none expressed that they were formally affiliated with opposing sides of the conflict in Syria. As with their non-religious belonging, claiming political neutrality did not mean that they were not invested in the debate or avoided partners because of opposing views:

- Do you have any link with politics or religious groups?
- None at all. Syria Tomorrow is a humanitarian and charitable association only, we don’t have anything to do with politics. We help all fractions of Syrians. Our work is for people who have fled Syria in general, for example we also work with Palestinian Syrians if they come to us. We offer them the exact same help as Syrians.
- But you do work with groups that have political or religious ideas, such as the Syrian Coalition\(^\text{174}\) and Islamic Relief Worldwide\(^\text{175}\)?
- We will cooperate with anyone that helps Syrians, including the UNHCR and religious groups like Islamic Relief Worldwide. IRW has a lot of projects and help a lot of people. The Coalition is mostly in Turkey anyway and no one really gets any help from them here.\(^\text{176}\)

\(^{172}\) Barnett, “Humanitarianism Transformed,” 724.
\(^{173}\) Ibid.
\(^{174}\) The National Coalition for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, founded in Qatar in 2012 and recognized by at least 40 states as the legitimate representative for the Syrian people.
\(^{175}\) International Islamic humanitarian organization established in 1984.
\(^{176}\) Fatima, Interview by author.
When it comes to personal views, some organization leaders and members did confide in me their personal opinions. However, they always made a sharp distinction between their own views and the official standpoint of their organization, like Jan Abaza here:

   Of course, when we started this, when I did the interviews I didn’t ask about this [political standpoint]. Actually, I am against the regime. But I’m trying to work with people and we need to accept each other, otherwise, we will not be able to rebuild our country. And some are with the regime and they have disagreements and arguments. But I work on this, that we try to talk about it. It is a big responsibility for the mothers, they are raising their kids and they have to be really careful about what they are teaching them. How to be merciful, how to keep going, to be sure that they are raising them well and accept others.177

All organization members and leaders that told me their personal views on al-Assad’s regime, were against him and supporters of the revolution. Some also identified as “the opposition”. Ahmad Kesibi, leader of Hamzat al-Khatib, told me he left Syria already 20 years ago because he was part of the opposition. This does not necessarily mean that all Syrians in Cairo oppose the current Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. Maysa Ayoub’s study does not dig into the question of political affiliation, except for outlining reasons for leaving Syria. Most respondents cite frequent bombings and lack of financial security as reasons for fleeing rather than political opposition.178 I have explained the meaning of the two flags visible in children’s drawings and as Jan Abaza said, arguments regularly broke out in her organization because of opposing views on this topic. It is therefore safe to say different views are present. As a researcher with little time to gain personal confidence, it is likely that not all interviewees wished to confide in me, or that they wanted to portray their situation according to my perceived expectations. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions on this topic.

6.5 Conclusion

The Syrian organizations seem to be just as invested in improving the current living situation for the Syrians in Cairo as in ensuring their ability to positively aid their home country. The dual nature of offering basic aid as well as long-term, sustainable services is visible in all the organizations. Besides their apparent lack of involvement in religious matters, the services of the Syrian organizations are surprisingly similar to those Charles Hirschman found among religious communities in the US: serving the material needs, housing, employment, language skills and creating a new social life. The organizations gave clear reasons for their various

177 Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
services, promoting independence, preparing their community and especially the children for the rebuilding of Syria while maintaining a neutral attitude towards religious and political ideas.

I find it interesting that the organizations mainly give the same services, and also offer the same reasons for choosing these services. This can have several explanations. As I have tried to show in this chapter, organization members give clear motives for the services they have chosen and explain the reasons for choosing them. But it might not entirely be a question of choice, the organizations could also be offering the same services because they are the only services they are allowed to give in the Egyptian context. As Bayat has noticed with Arab NGOs, they are vulnerable to government pressure and regulated by strict laws (I will discuss this further in chapter 8). This can affect the services they are giving. Another reason for them offering the same services could be that they have found a gap. As Grabska’s findings conclude, the Sudanese in Cairo would criticize aid from international actors if it were not sustainable, or if it fostered dependence. Sustainable aid and building independence is exactly what the Syrian organizations are trying to offer, through skill building and education, but also by preparing for the return to Syria and create personal bonds between the Syrians in Cairo. Therefore, the gap might be that the larger international agencies are not focusing on this. These organizations and the cooperation with the Syrian ones will be the topic of the next chapter.
7 Cooperation and competition: Working with partners

- In the beginning there was at least money and now there isn’t.
- Why was it easier in the beginning?
- Because a lot of people had the possibility to fund in the first phases. They had more savings and they were passionate about paying for the revolution and after a while, this requires massive investments. We all started in a good way, and then the wearing down of the revolution started. The funding and paying for everything now is different from the beginning.179

Egypt is the home of a multitude of humanitarian, international agencies as well as approximately 44 000 Egyptian and international NGOs.180 The UNHCR, which is in charge of the situation for all the country’s refugees, mentions 34 partner organizations on their country page for Egypt (the number is adjusted for 2015).181 Even when taking into account that most of these organizations also work on other projects, they make for a complex web of services and partners. The Syrian organizations would always underline their cooperation with these other entities and their dependence on such cooperation.

My initial guess is that both parties have something to win by cooperating. As Elizabeth Ferris points out, large, international organizations have easier access to funds, but are distanced from the beneficiaries.182 Smaller organizations have easier access and links with the community.183 This should be visible in the Syrian organizations.

But do these potential benefits for the big and small organizations always mean that they manage to focus on their shared concern for Egypt’s refugees? I would assume that also challenges and problems arise from their interaction, because of differences in priorities or assessment of the situation. I wish to examine how the Syrian organizations in fact manage this cooperation and what challenges they encounter in their efforts to cooperate. Are they utilizing their strengths as local organizations? Or are they swallowed up, catering to the larger organizations’ priorities?

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179 Mostafa, Interview by author.
183 Ibid., 325.
7.1 The Role of the UNHCR

When discussing services to the refugees in Egypt, it is impossible not to include the UNHCR. They are the main driving force and provider of funding for many of the organizations active in this field. Egypt is a signatory to the UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention, which grants all refugees coming to the country protection from *refoulement*, being returned to country of origin, and access to basic services, such as medical help.\(^{184}\) In Egypt, the UN has the responsibility for the practical implementation of services to refugees, including registration, collecting pertinent documents and interviewing asylum seekers to establish their right to protection.\(^{185}\) Services available to refugees are also the responsibility of the UNHCR, but in practical terms they have handed this over to different partner organizations. Entering partnership with the UNHCR gives the organization the responsibility to perform certain tasks, and in return part or full funding to implement programs. Partner organizations take care of all UNHCR services, leaving the agency free to focus on protection issues and give advice and logistical help to the service providing organizations.\(^{186}\) These partners are independent organizations that provide services according to their strengths and competence. For example, Caritas is running medical facilities, Catholic Relief Fund is giving educational grants to cover school fees, and Doctors without Borders (MSF) offer psychosocial support. They are responsible for registration and determining eligibility for their services, collecting fees and following up vulnerable persons. The partners are divided in two groups, *implementing partners* and *operational partners*. The difference between them is that implementing partners receive all the funds to implement their projects by the UN, while operational partners use of their own budgets and do not receive funding.\(^{187}\) But they are still listed as partners, participating in meetings and are considered as instrumental in providing services for refugees.\(^{188}\) Some are specialized for refugees from specific countries; others give general services for all refugee groups. Because of the large influx of Syrians over a short period of time, the services provided for them are sometimes different from the services for other refugee groups, such as Sudanese and Eritrean.\(^{189}\)


\(^{185}\) Ibid.

\(^{186}\) Neville, Interview by author, Cairo, February 26, 2015.


\(^{188}\) Ibid.

\(^{189}\) Until the Syrian influx, Egypt was housing a little over 100,000 refugees in total, with Sudanese being the largest group. The number of refugees was therefore doubled with the arrival of the Syrians.
7.1.1 Selecting partners

- You don’t cooperate with the UNHCR?
- No.
- Why not?
- No one called us and we didn’t call them.\textsuperscript{190}

How does the UNHCR select their partners? A UNHCR Program Officer, Neville, explained that in order to become a partner, the organization must apply through a process called Call for Expression of Interest.\textsuperscript{191} This is a process open for all organizations in Egypt, small and large. In the application, the organization has to show its capability, cost effectiveness and experience in providing services in their chosen field. This is to make sure all funds are spent well and all services are of optimal quality.\textsuperscript{192} Neville here describes the importance of making sure the organization is serious and well established before entering cooperation:

The credibility of the organization is very important. We make sure they are not briefcase organizations that will disappear when they have gotten money. There needs to be a reference [either] internationally, working with the UNHCR in other locations or nationally established. So we don’t go into a risk.\textsuperscript{193}

Taking on the responsibility as a partner is a substantial job demanding resources and personnel. My informants in the UNHCR underlined the massive size of the operations carried out by the UNHCR, which is never small-scale. PR representative Ragnhild Ek explained that donors expect absolute transparency, to receive reports on every aspect of the funding and how the money is spent.\textsuperscript{194} Most of the organizations able to fulfill these criteria are bigger, international organizations with long experience, while the Syrian organizations are small and inexperienced. They would not have the personnel or administrative structures to satisfy donor demands. Yet, three Syrian-led organizations are on the 2015 list of organizations cooperating with the UNHCR. Two of them are organizations I have met with, namely Souriat association and Tadamon, both listed as implementing partners.

This is somewhat misleading. What has happened is that these Syrian organizations are registered under other organizations that are partners (the process and reasons for organizations registering under other organizations will be described in chapter 8). Through their registration, they have obtained a similar status as larger partners and gotten access to

\textsuperscript{190} Ahmad Kesibi, Interview by author.
\textsuperscript{191} Neville, Interview by author.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{194} Ragnhild Ek, Interview by author, Cairo, February 24, 2015.
UNHCR funding and logistical help. Neville explains the benefits associated with this for the UNHCR:

“We do not cooperate directly [with the smaller organizations] but our partner organizations can do so and we encourage them to involve them. It is recommended to better reach the ailing. They do work in a non-costly fashion, often using 35/40$ to implement small projects. If a CBO\textsuperscript{195} does well in reaching the ailing and help the community we encourage cooperation”.\textsuperscript{196}

Another reason for the UNHCR to include and help the Syrian organizations is that in the beginning of the Syrian influx, the UNHCR had special funds earmarked for the Syrian refugees. These could be used to help build these organizations. Ragnhild Ek explained that before the Syrian influx there weren’t many organizations in Egypt doing work for refugees.\textsuperscript{197} After the influx, there was a surge of new organizations, either created from scratch or that started offering services for refugees. In addition, there was a lot of money available in the UN, also for small-scale grass root projects.\textsuperscript{198}

### 7.2 Benefits and disadvantages of cooperation

There are benefits to be drawn from cooperation with the UN, according to the two organizations counted among the UNHCR partners, Souriat and Tadamon. They both had the possibility of advocacy: “We would also collect the complaints to the UNHCR and put them on forms and send it to the UNHCR. It was a way to put pressure on them and a way to offer direct aid.”\textsuperscript{199} The UNHCR, responsible for hundreds of thousands of people, naturally require appointments to attend the requests of individuals and the waiting period can be quite long. The organizations also mentioned the possibility of having regular meetings, and ways of reaching responsible persons. The organization Souriat had even been granted a meeting with the High Commissioner himself, António Gutерres, to present their issues.\textsuperscript{200}

The organizations could also present the necessary and correct information about the UNHCR and the partner organizations. Jan Abaza in Souriat said about this period in time: “As partners of the UNHCR, we provide all the information for their services and all the information of their organizations.”\textsuperscript{201} This is no small matter, as the sheer quantity and

\textsuperscript{195} As I mentioned in 5.1, UNHCR employees I spoke with usually referred to all Syrian organizations as CBOs or community centers.

\textsuperscript{196} Neville, Interview by author. (My highlighting)

\textsuperscript{197} Ragnhild Ek, Interview by author.

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{199} Shirin, Interview by author.

\textsuperscript{200} Jan Abaza, Interview by author.

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
complicated nature of services refugees might be eligible for is no small jungle to navigate. To provide the beneficiaries with correct and updated information would therefore be important for the organizations.

This is a type of cooperation that could benefit both parts. Syrian organizations get information, funding and access to UNHCR staff, while contributing with their easy access to the communities and their network. They could easily find the most vulnerable persons in the area and advocate for them. For the UNHCR, localizing vulnerable persons is a priority.²⁰² An important reason for the UNHCR to support the organizations is that they get good feedback on the services people actually use and see a need for. Program Officer Neville said that “the refugees themselves say the community centers are good. It’s a place where their children can meet, and they can meet each other.”²⁰³ This demonstrates a type of community networking the UNHCR sees as favorable as they wish to support the development of strong communities.²⁰⁴

He also had the impression that international service providers use the organizations to pass messages about new criteria and services: ”I know both WFP, UNICEF and WHO²⁰⁵ uses the centers in the same way [to spread information]. If for instance they have new information about their services, criteria, for example UNICEF wants to start a new vaccination program, they use the centers to spread the word.”²⁰⁶ This makes the work in an urban setting easier for the UNHCR, according to him. In a refugee camp, the responsible authorities have access and control over the area. With an urban refugee population, the group is spread out which makes it more difficult to reach the vulnerable cases. The organizations could help with this.²⁰⁷

The cooperation could also result in bonds being formed between the Syrian organizations and the international partners. Because of constant contact, some of the Syrian employees or volunteers could form bonds so strong that they would be picked up by international organizations as a result. This was the case of Shirin, one of the most active members in

²⁰³ Neville, Interview by author.
²⁰⁵ The organizations World Food Program, United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund and World Health Organization respectively.
²⁰⁶ Neville, Interview by author.
²⁰⁷ Ibid.
Tadamon 6\textsuperscript{th} October. She had participated in a workshop for an INGO as part of their capacity building effort and the same day as my visit she got a call that her project had been picked out for implementation. This would make her a temporary employee and draw her away from Tadamon, where she was one of the most important figures. This shows that by working in a Syrian organization, a member could get expertise and knowledge of the community needed also in larger organizations and thereby be included in their staff.

7.2.1 Mistrust and accusations
At the same time, criticism of the UNHCR and their partners ranged from accusations of corruption, misuse of funds and a deeply rooted, almost conspiracy attitude towards UNHCR decisions. UNHCR data coordinator Ismail Abd al-Naby went as far as saying to me that “all people working with refugees in Egypt hate us”,\textsuperscript{208} While this might be an exaggeration, the cooperation with the UNHCR was a source of frustration. This is mirrored in Smallwood’s findings from Syrians in Lebanon.

Though refugees recognised that some good work was being done, criticism of UNHCR and large INGOs was nearly universal; the perception of wastefulness and corruption may be more important than the extent to which it is accurate, sowing mistrust and souring potentially fruitful future relations between these organisations and local initiatives.\textsuperscript{209} Even though the organizations could achieve quite a lot by cooperating, the individuals I spoke with sometimes blended in their own personal issues with the UN into the mix. I had this conversation with Amir, a member of Tadamon 6\textsuperscript{th} October:

- Why doesn’t the UNHCR help us? Don’t they have money?
- They don’t have enough for all the people.
- What is the reason for that? Is that true? Really? They say they don’t have enough employees and can’t process the applications, but then they fired Syrians working there because they were giving information, breaking the confidentiality agreement. Talking to other Syrians from the community.\textsuperscript{210}

It seems this person thought the UNHCR made two mistakes here, hesitating to help the Syrians by pretending they didn’t have money and in addition firing Syrians even though they are short on staff.

However, I did not meet this particular criticism often, and even in the office on the same day, another volunteer defended the UNHCR: "If I am an employee and I don’t have any

\textsuperscript{208} Ismail Abd al-Naby, Interview by author, Cairo, February 10, 2015.
\textsuperscript{209} Smallwood, “Refugee Activists’ Involvement in Relief Effort in Lebanon,” 22.
\textsuperscript{210} Amir, Interview by author, Cairo, March 2, 2015.
money, I want to raise my own standard of living, what will I do? I will say “Shirin, give me 10 000 dollar. I will move your case from number 9000 to number 5”.”211

He here describes the issues that could arise if the agency does not strike down on employees misusing the system. This demonstrates a respect for the UNHCR’s decision to remain fair and treat all equally. Syrian employees accepting bribes or giving out information would have a very negative effect, also on the Syrian community, where richer persons could pay their way out of waiting in line.

When discussing these accusations of the UNHCR and partner organizations, it is important to remember that the Syrian organizations might meet the same criticism of misusing funds from their own beneficiaries. Wherever there is money and funds coming in, the receiver could be placed in a position of mistrust. My informants outside of the organizations, such as NGO workers and UNHCR employees, did present me with different stories and complaints about the Syrian organizations. Unfortunately, I could not get them confirmed, neither by other employees in the same entity, nor by the Syrian organizations. One such story is that Syrian organization leaders used collected money for their own gains and even fled Egypt by the sea with money raised from refugees.212 A former employee in the British-Egyptian NGO AMERA told me that most Syrian organization leaders were high standing members of the Muslim Brotherhood (as I explained in 4.2 this is a common accusation towards all Syrians in Cairo.)213 Ismail Abd al-Naby commented that “the Syrian community has a lot of talkers”214 meaning people not actually following through with anything. It is difficult to get these stories verified or assess how truthful they are, but I think they show that wherever there are funds coming in to an especially vulnerable group in dire need, there will always be suspicion of mismanagement, no matter whom the receiver is. The close contact between different organizations also augments the possibility of gossip and stories spreading.

7.2.2 “Their goal is to register as many as possible”

Another common complaint of the UN operation was about surveys and counting. Shirin in Tadamon 6th October had previously worked for the UNHCR and said this about their

211 Nadir, Interview by author.
212 Ismail Abd al-Naby, interview by author. This would entail that money collected from refugees were used to pay human smugglers.
213 Khaled, Phone interview by author, Oslo, January 13, 2015.
214 Ismail Abd al-Naby, Interview by author.
“Their goal is to register the highest number possible. I saw that what they want to do is to register the highest number possible. I was in the reception. There are lies there.”

While the UNHCR staff in general would stress the importance of mapping and surveying the needs of the refugee population, the organizations would criticize the same trend, blaming them for obsessive counting and recounting, rather than spending the money on services for the refugees. Rami in Tadamon Faysal had another example: ”A while ago Save the Children made a survey for the UNHCR to know who should get money or not. The survey cost 1 million dollar. The UNHCR paid this survey for them.”

When this happens at the same time as the UN and their INGOs are cutting actual services and blames the donors for having stopped giving money, it sends an unfortunate impression. However, as the UNHCR wishes to see “capacity, transparency and cost-effectiveness” from their partners, knowing who the beneficiaries are and how to help them is an absolute necessity. In addition, a very relevant factor contributing to counting and surveys is that the number of Syrians in Egypt has varied greatly over time. As I explained in the background chapter, the number was slowly rising from mid 2012, then peaking at 140 000 in November 2014 then somewhat decreasing because of the number of people leaving. This makes the recounting necessary, as many people left Egypt without informing the UNHCR or closing their files. In addition, the Syrians’ economic situation has also shifted. In the beginning of the influx, people were more affluent, as they reported to add to their income with savings or borrowed money. As the crisis prolonged, their savings were depleted, reducing their ability to close the gap between expenses and income. This also has created the need for reassessing the needs of the Syrians in Egypt. Abd al-Naby also explained this with the UNHCR’s need to avoid misuse of services. Sometimes they were receiving complaints about people receiving aid and not being needy. When it is discovered that refugees getting food stamps and financial support are living in good areas and running successful restaurants and businesses it is damaging to UNHCR services and reputation.

I also met criticism about the different international organizations’ administration costs:

They [UNICEF] are a huge office and they have so much money. I went to the meeting and they said they give the same sum [400 EGP per month as a teacher salary] to

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215 Shirin, Interview by author.
216 Rami, Interview by author.
219 Ismail Abd al-Naby, Interview by author.
everyone. The organizations here spend a lot on their own administration costs and a small percentage goes to the actual project. That is the truth and UNICEF is not the only one. Also in the UNHCR.220

UNHCR staff completely rejected the notion that their implementing partners were wasting money on administration. In fact, this was held as criteria, that no organization with excessive administrative costs would be chosen for projects.221

A possible explanation for these criticisms of the UNHCR, easily disputed and rejected by the agency, is that it is very difficult for the individual refugee and also for the Syrian organizations to check the actual budgets and their internal routines for checking up on their partner organizations. As I have explained, this process is quite substantial, and it is repeated every two years. The reasons the UNHCR gave me for keeping track on their beneficiaries and combat misuse is perhaps not communicated to the refugees in question. This could lead to misconceptions and frustration, and to rumors about mismanagement being spread. In addition, there was at least at one point in time quite substantial amounts of money coming in earmarked for the Syrians, something that was well known in the organizations and probably noticed among the Syrians that were given rights and services that are now withdrawn because of lack of funding. As I have mentioned, I might have gotten the same story had I spoken with Syrian beneficiaries about the Syrian organizations.

It seems clear that the Syrian organizations would also have to know at all times how many people they were reaching. In fact, all the Syrian organizations were able to tell me their number of beneficiaries without hesitation. Some organizations also saw the need for their own surveys.222 Fatima in Syria Tomorrow explained that this was to assess the needs of the Syrians in their area and also to find the most vulnerable individuals by comparing them to each other: “We made the surveys because some people are in a very difficult situation and have very little money, when you compare them with each other. That’s why we started the survey.”223

7.3 Utilizing their different strengths

There will naturally be differences in the way a large, multinational agency such as the UNHCR works, when compared with the small, mainly refugee-led Syrian organizations.

220 Rami, Interview by author.
221 Neville, Interview by author.
222 Tadamon, Syria Tomorrow and SET all mentioned that they had done surveys.
223 Fatima, Interview by author.
The two also have a different outlook on the situation. This is reflected in (among other things) how they address the people they are helping and adapt their services to them. Just like Katharzyna Grabska found when comparing the Sudanese CBOs’ services with those of the UNHCR, I found examples of the UNHCR and the Syrian organizations providing the same service, but with different objectives and perspectives. One such example is food distributions, here in the words of Shirin in Tadamon:

“...Its maybe the best thing, that we could go to them instead of them having to come here. They have to spend time getting here, in the heavy traffic, people arguing... No, we went, we knocked on the door, “Come in”, we even made small cards with pictures, to give them a bit of hope and optimism and wrote on them that we are all in this together. They thought it was very nice. These were very nice days. I have a lot of pictures from it. People would invite us in and offer us food.”

This is a clear example of personal service that goes above and beyond, which could be said to be the forte of the Syrian organizations. As their members also are Syrian, many have themselves fled the war and persecution in Syria, they bring closeness to their beneficiaries: “We are all in this together”. Several organizations described similar home visits when surveying or establishing the needs of the beneficiaries. A home visit costs no money apart from transportation, as the personnel would be unpaid volunteers, but it gives back clear information about the beneficiaries and what state they are in, their needs and so on. It also gives contact with the community, being met personally by a member of the organization. As Elisabeth Ferris writes on Southern NGOs’ strengths and weaknesses: Clear information and contact with affected communities are their ultimate strength.

[Local faith communities are among the first to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of affected people — long before international organizations are able to move relief assistance in. [...] Southern NGOs are uniquely placed to respond to the needs in their communities and need support in their institutional development.]

This also seems to be true for the Syrian organizations.

The UNHCR and their adjoined organizations have to demonstrate a different capacity: to provide aid to thousands of people, work in all areas of Cairo or Egypt, and spend both time and money wisely. While the UNHCR officials I spoke with all rejected the notion that a Syrian organization could be an independent, operational partner, they spoke highly of the ones they knew of (namely Souriat and Tadamon) and in general expressed admiration for

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224 Shirin, Interview by author.
225 Both branches of Tadamon, and Syria Tomorrow mentioned this in my interviews.
226 Elizabeth Ferris, “Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations,” 325.
the speed and diversity of local and national NGOs. While the Zamalek branch of the UNHCR at the most could register 1000 people in a day, the Syrian organizations could give their beneficiaries their undivided attention and interest. These are two very different approaches to the same problem: Reaching the people in need.

7.3.1 Different descriptions of the situation
Another difference between the Syrian organizations and the UNHCR, besides their adaptation of services, was their description of the current situation for Syrians in Egypt. Ragnhild Ek explained to me how the UNHCR had moved on from the emergency part of the situation and was starting a new chapter, the phase of development and resilience. As the largest influx had ceased, it was necessary to reevaluate the needs of the Syrians in Egypt. This meant moving on from the initial emergency of the situation, to a more long-term development period. The names of the UNHCR reports show this: From publishing Response Plans they are now calling the reports Resilience Plans.

The Syrian organizations however would underline the mere duration of their stay in Egypt as a problem, made worse by the cuts in funding and loss of support for their organizations. The lack of legal rights and possibility to reunite with one’s family also made the situation unbearable for many.

In the end, who has the power to control the narrative of the situation? Since the UNHCR is the largest agency, they to a certain point have control of the description of the events. They are the most experienced actor with ample opportunity to influence the public and media debate. I have thus far kept one of the most important actors out of the debate: the donors. In terms of funding, or in the very least large scale funding, the UNHCR is the agency communicating with their different donor countries and their description ultimately becomes truth. The remainder of this chapter will outline the role of this crucial actor for the active organizations.

7.4 The backdrop: Donor power
The UNHCR staff I met with would underline that donors needed to have very clear information about the funding, the capacity of the organizations and clear result reports with an account of every Egyptian pound spent. Elizabeth Ferris has noticed the increased demand also on quite small NGOs to deliver results and fulfill “increasingly stringent reporting

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227 Interviews with Ragnhild Ek and Neville.
228 Ragnhild Ek, Interview by author.
requirements."229 This can be a hard task for a local NGO run by volunteers with little money for administration costs. Another complicating factor is that a large majority of NGOs, especially of Southern NGOs, is dependent on foreign aid sources.230 According to Ferris, this could pose a problem, because it might make the NGOs prone to the pressure of an involved government. In addition, it could damage both their autonomy and link with the grass root: “To get funding, NGOs have to become “donor-driven” and have shifted their activities to match the goals of the donors, starting projects not because there is bottom-up demand but rather because there is top-down supply of resources.”231 Lack of reporting can cause a lack of trust with ensuing reductions in funding. SET identified this as a problem: “Among the difficulties we encountered is that the donors have weak trust. They don’t see where the money go.”232

These small, Syrian organizations can have problems satisfying the strict donor demands. Nonetheless, for larger agencies it is a priority to cooperate with smaller communities and organizations, and this is underlined in the UNHCR 2015-2016 Response Plan for Egypt: “To empower communities and further strengthen effective community participation, 3RP partners will continue to support refugee community centers and their activities.”233 This is as I have mentioned part of the transition from the emergency part of the operation to the “resilience and development” phase. In addition, we see here that there is a larger goal: Supporting organizations is part of the plan to develop and strengthen the community as a whole.

However, the cuts in funding for the Syrian organizations are unfortunately concurring with the movement into this “development and resilience” part of the refugee response operation, taking over for the emergency response. This can hardly be seen as a promotion of development or building resilience, something the Syrian organizations also lamented, like here by Jan Abaza in Souriat:

I know there is a shortage of budget everywhere for refugees, but we are a very new organization, it’s very wrong that they treat us like any other organization that has been working for ten years. We needed more time, just to stand. We had just raised our heads and we started having a name and to work. And they [the UNHCR] just broke us.234

229 Elizabeth Ferris, “Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations,” 318.
230 Kim D. Reimann, “Up to No Good?,” 43.
231 Ibid.
232 Mostafa, Interview by author.
234 Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
All these small Syrian organizations are in fact working with long-term aid: vocational training, job placement, education and promotion of livelihood. It would be logical to conclude that these are not part of an emergency response but would fit perfectly into the resilience and development part. Still, the organizations’ funding was cut and they were obliged to reduce their activities.

7.4.1 Reasons for underfunding
Why did this happen? As Abaza’s quote above shows, it is ultimately a question of money. The amount of funding is in no way controlled by the UN, but rather by the UN donors. Criticism has been directed at the donor countries of late for not responding to the UN plea for increased help. June 2015 the UNHCR released a report warning of a severe funding crisis for the Syria operation, having a funding gap of US$3.47 billion. This means the agency has received 23 per cent of their estimated need and High Commissioner António Guterres called for more solidarity and responsibility-sharing from the international community. Egypt is mentioned in particular as a country experiencing severe underfunding, only having received 15 per cent of estimated need.

There are several potential reasons for this underfunding. Firstly, the funding of the initial emergency part of a crisis is easier than long-term operations. It is easier to collect money for a newly erupted crisis dominating the media and public debate. Long-term conflicts with no end in sight do not bear the same appeal. In addition, funds can be taken from long-term interventions if there are still basic humanitarian needs not being met. How does this fit the example of Syrian refugees in Cairo? Ragnhild Ek explained that in the beginning of the Syrian influx, special centers were set up to register and offer services to them. An example of this is the UNHCR itself, a new branch was set up in the central Cairo neighborhood Zamalek. Registration teams would also travel around to areas with a lot of Syrians to register those settling down outside of Cairo. This happened because of the high and sudden influx of Syrians, to address the initial emergency of the situation. This phase had created a large amount of funds especially for the Syrians.

236 Ibid., 40.
237 Ibid., 9.
Secondly, the aid sector is experiencing an increased use of control mechanisms on funding. The receiver is not free to decide where the funds should be spent and where the need is greatest. Barnett notes that since the 1980’s an increasing tendency is to get control over the humanitarian response through earmarking of their funds: “Earmarking means that the donor dictates where and how the assistance will be used, frequently identifying regions, countries, operations, or even projects.”

In the case of Cairo, another reason for the special services for Syrians was precisely that the UNHCR received a large number of donations and funds earmarked for the Syrian refugees. These funds could not be merged with the funds for other refugees, to serve the refugee population as a whole, they had to be used for services to Syrians. This limits the autonomy of the humanitarian agency, which is forced to accept the demands that come with the funds.

A third reason is competition between the response organizations. The emergency phase draws in a lot of large, international humanitarian organizations competing for funds. They will wish to show their competence by responding quickly in emergency situations. Elizabeth Ferris notes how important it is for these different, international NGOs to demonstrate their ability to mobilize quickly and links this with donor competition: “In view of the competitive environment for raising funds, it is important for international NGOs to demonstrate their presence in a given emergency — even when it might be more cost-effective to channel funds through an already operational partner.”

Coordinating work between different organizations is a large operation, and sometimes it can be seen as easier for an organization to “walk it alone.” International NGOs will often work for a time period on a crisis because they have the ability to “respond immediately, visibly and often effectively to large-scale humanitarian emergencies” and then pack up and leave once the emergency is over. Local NGOs, however, remain for the long-term. In the context of Cairo, Ragnhild Ek also noted this in the early phase, a high presence of organizations where previously there were few actors working on refugee response.

However, at the time of my visit, the UNHCR was preparing for the merging of the Zamalek office with the old one, in 6th October City, due to the fact that the Syrian influx no longer

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240 Ragnhild Ek, Interview by author.
241 Ibid.
242 Elizabeth Ferris, “Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations,” 322.
243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid., 318.
246 Ragnhild Ek, Interview by author.
needed special resources in the same degree. This was also because the funds had lessened and several organizations were closing down or reducing the number and scope of services for the Syrian refugees. The emergency part of the operation was over and with this the UNHCR started experiencing a funding gap.

The example of Syrians in Cairo outlines well some of the challenges of the aid industry and shows how it works. Funding shifts from crisis to crisis, long-term aid is harder to obtain than short-term emergency response, and earmarking of funding is increasingly common. The Syrian response seems to have experienced all these common tendencies.

7.4.2 Do they have donor independence?
A potential problem with donors controlling the flow of funds is that they might obtain control over which organizations are active and what services are provided. This is what Barnett calls “the power of the purse”. Can this type of dependency be avoided? Yes, claimed several of the Syrian organizations. The donors of the Syrian organizations were mainly other humanitarian organizations, though some also received support from individuals. The funding was not only monetary, but also came in form of cooperation with other agencies, capacity building, holding workshops or campaigns. Still, even though other organizations paid for their services, the Syrian organizations claimed they were irrelevant in terms of playing part in their decision-making. The organizations said they were completely in control of their services even though they had to approach many different donors and couldn’t very well say no to money offered by a donor with specific wishes on services to implement. The organizations gave three arguments supporting that they had independence: The principles of humanitarianism, their organizational flexibility and their own wish to cooperate with as many partners as possible.

Firstly, cooperation with different actors was seen as a way of securing the humanitarian principle of neutrality. An example is Fatima in Syria Tomorrow Obour who emphasized that though they are not a religious group themselves, they wished to cooperate with all types of organizations that had good services, not discriminating partners if they were doing useful work: ”We will cooperate with anyone that helps Syrians, including the UNHCR and religious groups like Islamic Relief Worldwide.”

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248 This organization became very controversial in Egypt after the government in 2013 shut it down for lack of registration.
249 Fatima, Interview by author.
Secondly, as organizations they wished to be as flexible as possible in offering services. A priority was to quickly organize events, even if it were a one-time effort. An example was Omar, also in Syria Tomorrow Obour, who told me that once they had been contacted by a group of Dutch girls that had said: "We want to come play with Syrian children." They had offered to pay for renting a space in which to play, provide equipment for different games and the transportation for the children. This struck me as a silly project, completely unsustainable, almost patronizing. Omar, however, did not see any harm in this: “We said yes, because anyone who wants to do something for the Syrian children is a good thing. It was a nice day.”

Their neutral view on other partners, not judging their efforts, enabled them to give the children a fun day, though it did not lead to long-term help.

A third explanation for their lacking concern with donor demands and losing autonomy was their wish and ability to cooperate with very many different partners. Leader of Syria Tomorrow Abd al-Hamid described their organizational cooperation like this:

- Well, we are not a support organization, we are an executive unit. All of our projects are through other organizations, Egyptian, international or Arab. So what we actually provide is the study behind the project, presenting of information necessary, and presentation of the project, assessment of the support needed, and the actual implementation.
- So in this cooperation, is it them [the donors] that decides what they want to do?
- No. We research and prepare the project and present it to them. In some instances, they have a project ready and they ask us to cooperate in seeing it through. They have a ready project; they have the funding and most international organizations work like this. But the other organizations we work with ask us to present a study and a project and they supply the funds and we take care of the implementation. We, our essence is service giving, we offer support to any organization or association that wants to help Syrian refugees in Cairo. Any organization, or volunteer team. We can organize and execute the projects wanted by other organizations. In addition to our specific services.

The cooperation he describes here is not a close one. He does not seem to express a feeling of pressure or a need to adjust their services or get involved with work they are not used to in order to please a donor. This could have three possible explanations. Firstly, several organizations I spoke with did not cooperate closely with one particular donor. They described a myriad of ways of getting money from different sources. This could be a way to avoid dependency.

250 Omar, Interview by author, Cairo, March 4, 2015.
251 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
For the organizations that did cooperate closely with one donor, the dependency in fact led to a very vulnerable situation once the funding was cut, as the example of Souriat shows. The organization, which UNHCR staff praised for doing a great job, did not manage to withstand the cutbacks and at the time of my visit the organization was at its knees, having let 18 out of 22 staff members go and reduced their services to a minimum.

Secondly, several of the organizations offered activities that did not cost a lot of money. This meant that they didn’t necessarily need to accept money from donors that expressed wishes to implement activities they themselves were not comfortable with. Thirdly, until recently, many of them were receiving money directly from the UNHCR or their partner organizations. Some were getting a steady supply of funding, while others were getting support earmarked for specific activities from UNHCR partners. This means they were getting experience and expenses covered, while benefitting from the large sums of money coming into the region, earmarked for the conflict. Since the operational and implementing partners they were registered under had their own projects, they might not be so inclined to influence the operations of the smaller Syrian organizations. These reasons may explain why the organizations displayed a very flexible and generous attitude towards donors and reported that they didn’t experience pressure or loss of autonomy.

Charles Hirschman writes on organizations’ wish to appear in control and be resilient. If the organizations were unmasked as mere show puppets for larger organizations, this would not enable them to promote their own resilience and control of the situation. This is an explanation I must take into account. Maybe they were in fact dependent on donors but chose to downplay this to me. This could have several reasons, such as a wish to appear professional and put their organization in a good light. If I had had more time gaining their trust, I might have gotten a different impression, but as I through my short fieldwork had limited time in each organization, it is conceivable that details were withheld from me.

### 7.5 Conclusion

The international actors, such as the UNHCR, emphasize their wish to cooperate with smaller, local entities, to strengthen the community and to get access to vulnerable cases. Meanwhile, the Syrian organizations can advocate for their beneficiaries and get information on services. Through cooperating with international or larger organizations they gain access to not only funding, but also capacity building for their members and logistical help. Thereby, in terms of managing a fruitful cooperation, both parties have something to gain, despite
some degree of accusations and suspicion from both sides. None however communicated the need to end partnership or avoid contact because of this mistrust. The Syrian organizations both expressed desire to increase cooperation, as well as claim that they wanted to stay independent, instead of lamenting their lack of control or dependence on larger agencies. This way they could learn from organizations different from themselves, and unite when needed in providing aid.

Local organizations, international NGOs and the UN entities fulfill different criteria and have different strengths. This could be good services, ability to respond quickly to crises, offering sustainable long-term help, trust from the community or just a lot of money with which to implement services. For this reason, they are not always in direct competition, as they are fulfilling quite different needs, even though they might be responding to the same problem. A clear example is Tadamon’s personalized visits to the Syrian community to assess their needs.  

To survive in this climate where several organizations are working in the exact same environment, the organizations must offer something that makes them stand out. If the Syrian newly established organizations are managing to be active, it must be because they are meeting a need that is not being addressed. They may not be your typical bottom-up grass-root organizations, but at the same time they represent the closest thing to local, community-near movements. They do after all have a much closer link with the Syrian community than the international aid organizations and they preach their cause when they are able to.

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252 This visit is described in 7.3.
8 Egyptian hindrances: Laws and restrictions on NGOs

Article 75: Right to establish associations

Citizens have the right to form non-governmental organizations and institutions on a democratic basis, which shall acquire legal personality upon notification. They shall be allowed to engage in activities freely. Administrative agencies shall not interfere in the affairs of such organizations, dissolve them, their board of directors, or their board of trustees except by a judicial ruling.²⁵³ (Quote from of the Egyptian Constitution)

As Asef Bayat writes, a challenge facing Arab NGOs in general is that they are prone to state pressure and surveillance by the government. NGOs providing basic aid are welcomed, while the ones addressing human rights, or advocating for vulnerable groups are hindered. This, according to Bayat, makes them unable to foster development.²⁵⁴ Maybe this can help explain what type of services these Syrian organizations provide? Are they participating freely with the services they wish to implement or do these Egyptian laws and regulations dictate the work they take on? I will in this chapter look at the Egyptian Law of Associations, which governs civil society. What implications does this law have for the Syrian organizations? Does it affect their internal structure as well as the services provided?

8.1 Civil society in Egypt

Even though civil society in the Arab region is hindered, as we will see, by state governance and repressive laws, there is still a tradition for participation and activities. Firstly, there are several examples of use of mass protest. Examples include the Kifaya movement in 2007-8 and the popular uprising against President Mubarak in 2011. Civil society in Egypt has roots back to the 19th century and the formation of the working class and professional middle class.²⁵⁵ These groups formed professional associations, firstly reserved for lawyers and businessmen.²⁵⁶ Also, in Egypt and the entire Arab world, the role of religious volunteerism is central. Among the pillars of Islam is zakāt, donating a portion of one’s wealth to the poor. This, according to Amani Kandil, political scientist and editor of the Arab Network for Non Governmental Organizations, lays the foundation for a religious, social responsibility “thereby reflecting the view that an individual is always a part of the community, and what belongs to him or her in the ultimate sense belongs to the community”.²⁵⁷ Additionally, the

²⁵³ International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "NGO Law Monitor: Egypt."
²⁵⁴ Bayat, "Activism and Social Development in the Middle East," 17–18.
²⁵⁶ Ibid.
²⁵⁷ Amani Kandil, "Civic Service in the Arab Region," 41.
idea of ṣadāqa is a voluntary donation intended to bring the donor closer to God. Coptic Christians similarly have the idea of charity as a central value. 258

Professor of Political Science at Cairo University, Mustapha K. Al-Sayyid defines civil society as “the presence of a considerable number of formal associations catering to the varied interests of citizens in several areas of their social activities” and further, that the state respects their autonomy and their struggle for achieving rights, also for minority groups, as long as it is conducted with peaceful means. 259 These three requirements are present in what he calls “liberal democracies” and one or two should be found present in all countries. 260

When one or more requirement is not met, this will cause hindrances for the organizations attempting to participate. After the formation of the republic of Egypt, the governing of civil society was codified through laws to decide what work the associations could be involved in. Although the quote above, from the Egyptian constitution, shows good will towards civil society participation, special laws governing NGOs make the practical work of participation difficult. In addition, a state of emergency was declared in 1967 because of the Arab-Israeli war and renewed after the assassination of President Sadat in 1981. The law enables the government to suspend citizens’ constitutional rights and place restrictions on their activities, to protect them.

8.2 Consequences of the NGO law

Civil society in Egypt has been instrumental in reforming the Egyptian constitution, in order to allow free establishment of associations. 261 As seen in the quote introducing this chapter, the Egyptian constitution opens for the running of civil society groups and associations, but a separate law governs the specificities. The Law on Associations, often referred to as the NGO law, is like similar laws elsewhere in the Arab region characterized by human rights agencies as restrictive and disrespectful to the right of forming associations. 262

The law was written and put in effect during the reign of ousted president Hosni Mubarak. After his reign ended, civil society groups of all kinds in Egypt nurtured the hope that the new government would fuel change in this aspect. During both the rule of the military

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258 Ibid., 42.
260 Ibid.
council, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and former President Mohammed Mursi several drafts to improve the NGO law were introduced. As an additional positive step, civil society groups were invited to offer their suggestions.

However, in the end, their alterations were all cast aside and President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi implemented a version more restrictive than any of the previous drafts. The new law was set in motion in August 2014 and this was met with national and international uproar.

Amnesty International’s deputy director called the new law ”a death sentence for NGOs” and the organization issued a statement pointing out the breach of Egypt’s international obligations: “This requirement is inconsistent with Egypt’s international obligation to respect the right to freedom of association. It also contravenes the Egyptian constitution, which guarantees the right of everyone to form associations by mere notification rather than permission”.

President al-Sisi’s new amendments include governmental inspections of premises and dissolving groups on quite vague grounds such as ”threatening national unity” or “running against public order”. Suggested sentences, besides the immediate shut down of associations, are prison up to one year and fines exceeding 100 000 EGP. In addition, in an amendment issued September 2014 President al-Sisi penalized receivers of foreign funding with a life sentence, either jail time or death penalty. No funding is allowed coming from outside of Egypt, as this according to the amendment can “undermine national interests”.

8.2.1 Susicion and defamation tactics
As all organizations working in Egypt are aware of, these are not empty threats. Many of my informants spoke of known examples of organizations that had closed, like the British-Egyptian NGO AMERA that worked with refugee legal aid. Maysa Ayoub, researcher at the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, spoke of the drastic change in attitude from the government: “There are strict rules to have an NGO registered in Egypt. In the past, you could operate without being registered. The government turned a blind eye. They knew

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264 Amnesty International, “From Bad to Worse: Looming Deadline Compounds Egyptian NGOs' Woes.”
265 Ibid.
266 International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “NGO Law Monitor: Egypt.”
268 Mada Masr, “President Amends Law Include Life Sentence Receiving Funds, Arms.”
AMERA existed, but they left it. […] So what is happening now is that they are becoming more alert.”

In the winter of 2011, 17 American NGOs were raided in part of a crack down of foreign funding. Spring 2015, after President al-Sisi’s amendments to the NGO law, the Ministry of Social Solidarity shut down a total of 380 NGOs affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the course of two months.

This hunt on the NGOs is further strengthened by government controlled, pro-Sisi media, according to the organization POMED (The Project on Middle East Democracy). Biased media report state propaganda, use defamation tactics, accuse organizations of spying, and describe them as American agents and Trojan horses. POMED describes the attacks on NGOs as attempts at placing fear in the Egyptian people:

At different times the bogeyman colluding with NGOs has taken various shapes: Israel and the Zionists, Hezbollah and other Shia militias, counterrevolutionary movements, remnants of the Mubarak regime, the Muslim Brotherhood, Coptic Christians, the CIA, and of course, the U.S. government. These attacks are, to be certain, thinly veiled attempts to discredit critics and justify heavy-handed responses. […] Indeed, the government frequently depicts its targeting of NGOs as an ostensible public service to protect Egyptians from “foreign plots.”

This is seemingly done to create fear in the public and quell critical voices, while blaming foreign elements. This becomes particularly harmful when the distinction between lawful, registered organizations and unregistered organizations is not made clear to the public and anyone trying to balance the debate meet hostility. POMED itself did not criticize this trend unpunished: the newspaper Al-Ahrām al-ʿarabī described their efforts as “an attempt to install Islamists in the Egyptian government”. Maysa Ayoub also described the suspicion directed at NGOs:

I understand that there is a law and everyone should abide by it. At the end the government should with the people decide whatever law is good for them. But what I don’t like is this belief or suspicion of everything. As a government, you should make sure that all organizations working on your territory abide by the law, at the same time, it’s not because it has some foreign members you should be suspicious. Being

269 Maysa Ayoub, Interview by author.
270 Mada Masr, “With Latest Crackdown, State Dissolves 380 NGOs in Just 2 Months.”
272 Ibid.
273 Ibid., 14.
suspicious of any NGO that gets funds, that is the atmosphere now. You hear the word “funds” and you become suspicious. […] There is a suspicion for any foreign NGO trying to promote democracy or human rights in Egypt. The suspicion is that they might be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, having an agenda; I think this is how they think. So I don’t think that refugees are in a worse situation than Egyptians. It’s only Syrians because they are politicized\textsuperscript{274, 275}

8.3 Solutions for NGOs

The NGOs in Egypt seem to have two available options as long as this law is in place: Register and work under repressive governance or to not register and work illegally. I will show that this is not necessarily true, as my informants have shown me other options, of abiding by the law while ensuring that they can stay operative. But first I will outline the risks associated with both options.

8.3.1 To register

The registration of an organization is not merely notifying the authorities that it exists; rather, it is a detailed account of everything pertaining to their work. While visiting the organization Hamzat al-Khatib, the CEO walked me through the registration process and showed me the papers. They outline not only basic information like date of establishment and name, but also the full address of all branches, and specificities of their activities. It shows that Hamzat al-Khatib is authorized to work with “sponsorship of children, social, cultural, educational activities, sponsorship of schools, organizing events, giving financial support, educational classes of computing, participating in medical support, collecting and distributing medicines and volunteering for the citizens of the Republic.”\textsuperscript{276} They also had to pay a fee of 3900 EGP to show their serious commitment and in their file also kept the receipt for this administrative fee.\textsuperscript{277}

After completing the registration, the organization could of course be approved, get its permit and begin the work, like in the case of Hamzat al-Khatib. However, complying with the law does not necessarily have this result. The organization could be rejected; their activities could be seen as controversial or not in accordance with the law. As I have mentioned in 8.2, the law vaguely states that activities cannot “disturb public order” or “threaten national unity”.\textsuperscript{278} In addition, the process of registration is a time-consuming, drawn out process. NGOs have

\textsuperscript{274} Politicized in this context I take to mean that they (are perceived to) play a role in the Egyptian political climate, as described in 4.2.
\textsuperscript{275} Maysa Ayoub, Interview by author.
\textsuperscript{276} Ahmad Kesibi, Interview by author.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{278} International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “NGO Law Monitor: Egypt.”
reported handing in papers collecting dust for months and years, unable to start their work until approved.\textsuperscript{279} Abd al-Hamid, CEO of Syria Tomorrow said this about the process of registration:

As a legal matter it was easy, the problem is that the process can draw out for a long time. A meeting that should take place after three days could take a month. But as a legal matter, it is not complicated. […] It makes it easier, if it [the founder] is an Egyptian. The security proceedings will be easier. But the presence of Syrians is not illegal, but there will be some difficulties with the security issues.\textsuperscript{280}

In practical terms, registering means allowing government access to all relevant information: Funding, activities, premises, income and records.\textsuperscript{281} For NGOs working on sensitive portfolios of vulnerable or persecuted people, this in itself is unfortunate, not to say detrimental, to their work. As I will explain in 8.6, this can have consequences for the activities and services the organizations choose to initiate.

\textbf{8.3.2 Not to register}
There are severe sanctions for an organization that is not registered. Organization members can be fined, jailed and the organization can be shut down without notice. An unregistered organization can never be certain when the strike will come, and as I have mentioned, several unregistered organizations have experienced this first-hand. Maybe for this reason, none of the Syrian organizations I spoke with were unregistered. They had all taken measures to be registered in some way or another. Of the organizations I spoke with, two were registered in their own name, Syria Tomorrow and Hamzat al-Khatib. Tadamon is an Egyptian NGO registered also internationally, so the Tadamon offices I met with are under them and does not need separate registrations.\textsuperscript{282} This leaves SET and Souriat, which are not officially registered, and instead have negotiated other solutions. Instead of having their own permit, they operate under the coverage of other organizations, a process I will explain in the following.

Some organizations are unable to go through the process of registration. This can be because of their small size, limited funding or the nationality of the founders or managers. Abd al-Hamid, the head of Syria Tomorrow, told me that because of SET’s limited funding and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{279} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{280} Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
\item \textsuperscript{282} Rami, Interview by author.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
personal status as Syrian refugees, registration was not worthwhile. They did not meet the requirements and would probably not be approved:

Because they don’t have good connections, it would be difficult for them [to register]. In addition, at this time, the security clearance became very, very difficult. Before, the clearance was easier. In addition, they are a volunteer team. They don’t have big possibilities or the know-how to be an independent organization and have a secure funding. Their work is volunteer-based. As an organization, you have to have stable funding.²⁸³

I have explained that theoretically the NGOs have two options, registering or not. But other options have materialized and organizations have found ways of managing to appear as registered despite their difficulties meeting the criteria. One problem can be, as for SET, that they are a very small team doing volunteer work. Up until very recently, they did not have a board with the necessary members or the necessary administrative structures in place to go through the process of registration and security clearances. One solution is to create these structures, not necessarily because they need them but because they are necessary to fulfill the legal framework.

8.3.3 Help from an “umbrella organization”
Another solution is to get the entire organization included within another, registered organization, which becomes their umbrella, as I have chosen to call them. The organizations themselves used the Arabic word ghīṭā’, meaning cover or wrap. This way, the larger, registered organization functions as a legal coverage, bearing the responsibility for a smaller, unregistered one. Two of the Syrian organizations I met with, Souriat and SET, have chosen this solution, in order to follow the law. Souriat is registered under the Arab Organization of Human Rights (AOHR) and SET is under Syria Tomorrow. Both these umbrella organizations are larger, established organizations. Apart from that, there are few common denominators and the organizations have negotiated quite different deals and agreements with their umbrella. AOHR is, according to UNESCO, an NGO that works in the Arab region for the respect and insurance of human rights, advocating for political prisoners, organizing conferences and seminars and giving legal advice.²⁸⁴ As Souriat is involved in refugee-related work, charity provision and running activities and workshops, they are quite far away from each other in terms of activities. Not so with SET and Syria Tomorrow, they both work with refugee-related aid for Syrians and are only operative in Cairo. Syria Tomorrow has a

²⁸³ Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
room at their disposal at SET’s premises that they use for their activities in 6th October City. Souriat on the other hand, deals with their umbrella organization through regular meetings and AOHR is not directly involved in the day-to-day affairs.285

This umbrella system means that the Syrian organizations can work with the support from a larger entity, getting logistical and administrative help, and funds. These umbrella organizations could also be registered as implementing partners with the UNHCR and thereby draw the Syrian organizations with them in the partnership. This can be a fruitful agreement. SET is a small team with little resources, dependent on volunteers. Their close cooperation with Syria Tomorrow ensures stable support, while they can work on establishing separate projects and create their own board and administrative structure.286

However, this cooperation is not always flawless and can have negative effects on the running of the organization if there are disagreements. In the previous chapter, I explained the challenges organizations could have remaining independent from donors. To remain independent from the umbrella could be an equally difficult task. During my meeting with Souriat, a recurring topic was the cooperation problems they had with their head organization:

We as Souriat run the centers, but the management is from the AOHR. And here we have this gap and problems because these kinds of projects are new for them. They don’t do this, they just started doing this. And we have a different point of view of the way we have to run the place, so we have some problems.287

The cooperation problems here are related to the two organizations having different strengths and competencies. As I have mentioned, the AOHR does not normally work with refugee-related projects, or running activities and workshops. Also, the balance of strength is uneven between the two, AOHR is after all responsible for Souriat, and frustration grew because of their different points of view.

8.3.4 Help from (Egyptian) connections
Another option for organizations unable to register independently is, as I have explained, to make sure they are on the right side of the law by establishing the required administrative structures. The Syrian organizations mentioned one such administrative requirement specifically. My informants explained that there should for each organization be a minimum  

285 Jan Abaza, Interview by author.  
286 Mostafa, Interview by author.  
287 Jan Abaza, Interview by author.
of five board members, as well as the leader of the organization. These will be subject to a security clearance and this process can draw out. My informants explained that it is not a demand that board members and leaders are Egyptian nationals, but that it helps. If the board members are Syrians, it will be more complicated; if they are refugees, even more so. This might help explain why the registration became complicated for Souriat and SET, because they are the only ones led and run by Syrian refugees that arrived in Egypt after 2011. The leader of Hamzat al-Khatib has lived in Egypt for 20 years. The board members are all Syrians, but most of them have been in Egypt for extended periods. The leader of Syria Tomorrow has studied in Egypt for seven years and all the board members are Syrian students he met during this time period. This made it easier to get approval and they could register.

One solution for organizations run by refugees can be to ask contacts, such as Egyptian nationals, to register as board members to ease this security process. One of my informants had done so and was listed on the board of an organization. For the organization, this was quite invaluable, because it would greatly ease the clearance and because they knew and trusted the person, they didn’t run the risk of losing control to an outsider with sudden power over decisions.

8.4 Negotiating solutions

What are the reasons for these strict criteria? I have described the suspicion in Egypt towards foreign elements participating in civil society and NGOs. Depending on the time and context, culprits like Israel, Hezbollah, and the US government have all been accused of trying to obtain control over Egyptian civil society. This is reflected in the POMED report, and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch support their view. Funding coming from abroad is forbidden and foreign nationals wanting to establish organizations are hindered by the regulations set in place. Interestingly, for the Syrian organizations this has not led them to give up, but to ally with people who can be trusted, get support from other organizations and draw on Egyptians and other useful connections and resources in order to fulfill the criteria. I will argue that this shows the organizations’ flexibility, because it seems they are negotiating to find ways of following the rules and obeying the law, whilst making sure they are comfortable with their solutions. This is accomplished both through registering their

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288 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.
289 Ahmad Kesibi, Interview by author.
290 I have chosen not to include the informant or organization's name.
NGOs under different umbrellas, and by finding alternative solutions to difficult requirements in the law. It can be questioned whether they are fulfilling the intent of the law. The Egyptian government probably wants all organizations to register separately, so they have a complete record of the organizations active and have a correct impression of what kind of organizations (not to mention how many) are operative on the Egyptian territory.

On the other hand, the Syrian organizations are playing an important role in providing services to refugees, helping them with food and lodging. This should very much be in the interest of the government. After all, the organizations are providing a support network for a large group of refugees without other options.

8.5 Offering protection and legal services

- In your view, what are the main problems of the Syrians here in Egypt?
- Number one is the legal issue. The permits and some other issues that have to do with the law.\(^\text{291}\)

We have seen that the Syrian organizations are being flexible and negotiating to remain open, despite the obstacles placed by the NGO law. However, besides the NGO law, there are other challenges shaping their work. This part will address these challenges.

As the quote above shows, the head of the largest Syrian organization, Abd al-Hamid, identified the Syrians’ main problem as *legal issues*, such as permits. Maysa Ayoub, in her study on the needs and concerns of the Syrians in Cairo, notes: “In my research what I wanted to highlight was that these [protection and education] are the two main problems, or these are the two main issues that face any refugee, not only Syrian.”\(^\text{292}\) What do “legal issues” and “protection” have in common in this context, and protection from what and how?

8.5.1 Protection and legal residency

First of all, for any refugee it is instrumental to be protected from *refoulement*, being sent back to the country they have fled from. The UNHCR is instrumental in ensuring this. Even though they are often seen as an aid agency, their mandate is actually part protection and part assistance. Registration with the UNHCR gives the person a yellow card as proof of refugee status, which makes it impossible for the receiving country to return them.\(^\text{293}\) It also grants access to different aid, like medical assistance.

\(^{291}\) Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author.  
\(^{292}\) Maysa Ayoub, Interview by author.  
A question Ayoub and her research team wished to answer in their study was whether the double mandate of the UNHCR, both protection and assistance, was clear to the Syrians in Egypt. At this point in time, there was an alarming difference between the UNHCR number of registered Syrians and the Egyptian government’s assessment of how many Syrians had entered (ca. 100,000 versus 300,000). After July 2013, when Syrians were no longer allowed to enter Egyptian territory, the number of registered Syrians started rising. Ayoub concludes that this occurred because of the increased risk of arbitrary arrests after the summer of 2013. The number of registered Syrians shows that their need for the UNHCR’s protection was increasing. It was not that they were not aware of the UNHCR’s mandate, but they had not previously needed their help.

Second of all, the yellow card is the proof of legal residency in Egypt, as long as it is taken to a visa office or police station every few months for renewal of the residency permit. Subsequently, a refugee in Egypt must first seek protection from the UNHCR and then approach the Egyptian government to get a residency permit for a limited period of time (but open to renewal). So Ayoub and Abd al-Hamid are agreeing: Legal residency is a question of protection. Without it, a person is vulnerable to arrest and detention and in the worst case, being returned to country of origin.

On paper, this sounds relatively uncomplicated. The process of registering with the UNHCR for a Syrian is not a complicated feat. A separate office of the UNHCR has been set in place for this purpose. While all other refugees in Egypt are asked to go to the 6th October office far from the center, Syrians can approach a separate office in Zamalek, in the heart of Cairo.

However, the second step to legal residency from the Egyptian government is not as easy, which is why Abd al-Hamid identified it as a main problem for Syrians. Mostafa in SET explained that it could take two months to renew a permit valid for three months, a fact which is also mentioned in Maysa Ayoub’s study. This means that to have a valid residency permit at all times is an almost constant debacle. A lawyer specialized on Syrian cases, Rabeh Dessouqi, explained: “For any foreigner to get a residency permit in Egypt, it’s very difficult. In order to get it, you have to own something, be a student, be employed; this is for everyone who is foreigner.”

294 Ibid.
295 Ibid., 22.
296 Ibid., 19.
297 Rabeh Dessouqi, Interview by author, Cairo, March 1, 2015.
In addition, family reunification is not available for Syrian refugees in Egypt and families are divided as a result. Many families split up while in Syria, expecting they could reunite somewhere later. Mostafa in SET identified this as a main concern for the Syrians:

The most important problem is not the residency permit. The biggest problem is family reunion. Until now the Egyptian government does not help with this issue. We are Arabs and we have the same language. With the Europeans, whether in Norway or Sweden or any country, there is the offer of family reunion. If part of the family lives there they can invite their families to live with them. [...] If the mother or father goes somewhere, the children can come. We tried solving this several times also through the coalition. [...] Turkey is the only place that makes it easy for us and we can gather there.298

8.5.2 Attempts to address legal issues
These difficulties, renewing permits and Syrians getting arrested because of lacking registration with the UNHCR, are to a lesser extent addressed by the Syrian organizations. None of the ones I spoke with worked systematically with these legal issues. Also, no Syrian-led organization knew of any organization that did so. Instead, they had other ways of organizing help. Options included involving the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, that has a branch in Cairo, at least for those that are registered refugees. The Coalition was seen as the representative for the Syrians that oppose Bashar al-Assad, as opposed to the Syrian Embassy. This however was not a perfect solution:

We consider the Coalition to represent the Syrians. Our argument with them is that they are very lazy. That means they do their work in a weak way. But regardless of this we as the SET see them as what came from the womb of the Syrian revolution.299

Another option is that Egyptian lawyers are able to assist, for example in cases of detention and arbitrary arrests. One of these lawyers is Rabeh Dessouqi, an Egyptian lawyer that started working especially with Syrian cases. As an Egyptian national and certified lawyer he can assist Syrians and has taken it upon himself to offer legal advice and information, the price of which varies depending on the means of the client.

There are very few people working on this, he himself knew of one other Egyptian lawyer working with Syrian cases. According to him, Syrian lawyers, because they are foreigners, are not allowed to practice law in Egypt.300 Despite warnings by colleagues not to get involved with this sensitive subject he still wished to help because he saw a need not being met by anyone else: “The Syrian organizations are not authorized to give legal aid. They can

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298 Mostafa, Interview by author.
299 Ibid.
300 This would also apply to all other nationalities that would not be familiar with Egyptian law.
give financial aid and other support. They cannot give legal aid, there has to be a lawyer with them, recognized by the state itself. They do not have the power.”

This means that the legal issue of permits and protection concerns is somewhat addressed by other entities, other than the Syrian-led NGOs. However, the need is great and the question remains as to why they are not working with these issues? Of course, a Syrian lawyer cannot practice law in Egypt and assist in the same way as an Egyptian. But it is interesting to note that the Syrian organizations I spoke with in no way were discussing taking on this type of work, even though they claimed it was a big problem, maybe the biggest problem. This was also observed by some of the impartial (in terms of not organization figures) I spoke with.

Maysa Ayoub said: “I found some organizations focusing on very basic things: Clothes and blankets, very basic things. Charity, ya´ni.” Dessouqi noted the same thing: “The problem is that there is no organization offering these services [legal aid]. They give humanitarian relief, and all those things. But no one cares about the legal side of things. And this is the most important thing.”

It is clear that Syrians in Cairo have other concerns, such as financial woes, struggling to make ends meet, worrying about the children’s education, and harassment. These issues are all dealt with by the organizations. As Syrians, they could not address specific cases in court. But one available option is advocacy, to go together and advocate with Egyptian ministries for a change in status for Syrians. Some Syrian organizations did some advocacy work, either with individual cases for the UNHCR or through meetings with different Egyptian ministries to front their case and try to induce change for the Syrians. But these meetings seemed to mainly be of closed nature and were arranged by the individual organization, not putting up a collected front.

The problem might be that no Syrian-led organization work in an organized way with this issue without having his association be shut down and personally get in difficulties. The same is true for the Syrian coalition, to whom they sometimes referred cases. Dessouqi explained that Syrians couldn’t work with these issues:

- I heard there was a legal office belonging to the Coalition?

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301 Rabeh Dessouqi, Interview by author.
302 Maysa Ayoub, Interview by author.
303 Rabeh Dessouqi, Interview by author.
The problem with them is that the [Egyptian] regime doesn’t recognize the Coalition, or their lawyers. [...] The Coalition itself, they send their cases to us. They can’t do their own work.304

8.6 Unable to solve the main problem?

This means that the organizations are unable to offer help with some of the issues really hurting the Syrian refugees: Residency papers, family reunification, other legal quagmires, and imprisonment. I explained in the methodology chapter that I often got asked to help with these kinds of issues. Without naming names, organization members and leaders told me they themselves had expired passports, close family divided between three different countries without the ability to reunite in the same place, residency permits and other documents needing renewal. They could not help themselves, not to mention help others with the same problem.

Political scientist Mustapha al-Sayyid has noted that there is a general tendency among civil society groups in Egypt to avoid addressing issues that might damage their relations with the state apparatus:

Very few organizations, however, are willing to engage in confrontations with the state over the question of their autonomy or any other matter. Their leaders view maintaining good relations with the government as the best way to ensure receiving government favors in terms of appointments in legislative or advisory bodies, obtaining facilities and benefits for their members, or simply escaping the wrath of officials, particularly security forces.305

Contrary to the pattern Beinin and Vairel saw in the Arab region, “the weapons of the weak” and bypassing of authority is not used by these formal, civil organizations. With the strict laws in place and the sanctions facing NGOs that do not toe the line, this is perhaps not surprising. It would be difficult, not to say impossible for the Syrian organizations to get registered if they officially presented a wish to for example address refugee rights or advocate publicly for this group. When pressed, Abd al-Hamid in Syria Tomorrow said that these legal issues were not a topic for them, because they are a different type of organization, not involved in human rights: “We are civil organizations, so we will be expected to work on education, alimentary issues and charity. We are not competent to deal with the legal issues.”306

304 Ibid.
305 Mustapha K. Al-Sayyid, “Civil Society in Egypt?,” 238.
306 Abd al-Hamid, Interview by author (in Arabic).
This might be a valid point, because they have different aims with their activism, and they do not have the expertise to work with legal issues. In addition, several organizations said when faced with specific cases they would find appropriate solutions and at the very least be able to refer people to someone more competent. 307 Still, since I am discussing flexibility and how the organizations find solutions, it is valid to ask: why this inability to address an important issue, as identified by the organizations themselves? It could be because they do not wish to work with this issue, or it could be that they suspect that it might be too difficult and they should focus on something else. Addressing an issue the Egyptian government sees as controversial could put the organizations at risk, compromising their other important work. But as Dessouqi put it: “Law before food! Even if I have food, I can still be arrested. If I have money, I can also be arrested. I don’t know how long this crisis will last. Maybe another 20-30 years. So the ones that are here will live here.” 308 These problems need to be addressed by someone, as solutions would be instrumental to improve the wellbeing of Syrians in Egypt.

8.7 Conclusion
To sum up, we have seen that instead of allowing closure and uncertainty by not registering, or government control by doing so, the organizations find other ways: For example registering under other organizations or seeking help from Egyptian and other connections. Their flexibility is shown in their attempts at negotiating different deals to stay operative. Despite the harsh repercussions awaiting organizations that break the rules, they are managing to operate and get support from larger entities.

However, on the topic of services, it seems to be unanimous that the organizations are unable to withstand the pressures of the Egyptian government and address the most serious issues of their beneficiaries. The organizations are exercising self-restraint, avoiding services that can cause problems. As the political situation has deteriorated, the Syrians are in need of legal aid or organized advocacy in form of increased pressure on the government to ensure their continued protection and safety in Egypt. Help in this aspect is not being offered by the Syrian organizations that are instead trying to find help elsewhere. In terms of services offered, they seem to be offering what they are allowed to, which means they might not always be catering to the most pressing issues of the Syrian community.

307 SET, Syria Tomorrow and Tadamon all stated this in different ways.
308 Rabeh Dessouqi, Interview by author.
9 Conclusion

We are in a crisis time and we need to do anything we can as a collective instead of working as individuals.\textsuperscript{309}

This thesis has outlined the work done by Syrian organizations active in Cairo and their attempts at taking control over their situation and influencing their future. The return to their home country is a phase that must be met head on and they are wasting no time in preparing themselves and their children for a new, progressed Syria.

The organizations are able to respond to many of the issues facing the Syrian community, providing them with free services, catering to their wishes and needs. They keep track of their community in the area they serve and have established a viable network. Despite the harsh restrictions posed by the Egyptian NGO law, the organizations are able to offer many services.

Inside the organizations, they are creating family-like bonds and friendships and trust each other in sharing responsibility for the work. They recruit volunteers, spread information and connect with larger organizations. The UNHCR identifies their function as being a social gathering point, a launching place for information and a good way to for them reach the Syrian population.

When speaking with members of the organizations, it is difficult not to get carried away by their positive descriptions of events. It is in their best interest to describe their organizations as positively as they possibly can. Only giving their own description of events could therefore risk painting the picture of a blooming Egyptian civil society, where all groups, including refugees with minimal civil rights are able to participate. This is not the description I wish to present. I have therefore included two of the main obstacles facing these organizations in Cairo. One obstacle, of obtaining funding and cooperation with more experienced actors, can be found in many NGOs all over the world. The other obstacle is more specific to the country context of Egypt (or to the Arab region in general): laws and regulations governing civil society.

A central finding of this thesis has been that the organizations are able to do their work as long as they stick to the non-controversial forms of aid: teaching the Quran, English and math; running kinder gardens, distributing blankets and baby formula and providing job placement. No one has any interest in large segments of refugees in the streets or otherwise

\textsuperscript{309} Mostafa, Interview by author.
without help and resources. The organizations are therefore largely unhindered when attempting service provision. Furthermore, they avoid religious or political involvement, following the guidelines of neutrality and unity central in humanitarian work. I have suggested that this makes them easier to accept both by international agencies and donors, and by the Egyptian government.

The number one issue for Syrians in Egypt is protection. None of the organizations are able to address this issue. Even internally, the members are struggling with their own protection concerns. As the Egyptian lawyer Rabeh Dessouqi said: What is the use of food and money if you get arrested? This shows that despite the organizations’ ability to circumvent some of the regulations of the strict NGO law, the Egyptian government maintains control over their work. Fear of repercussion ensures that the organizations’ activities remain harmless, while their support initiatives relieve the Egyptian public sector from the added stress and expense of taking in over 100 000 refugees in a short space of time.

This thesis has also described some important factors in the creation of the organizations. Many organization members were completely without experience with organized work when they came to Egypt, or only had experience with individual work, for example organized by the neighborhood. This was the only way of civil participation possible in Syria. They express dissatisfaction with this and state that they can achieve more as a collective, structured group.

In Egypt, working together as a collective has become an option, and these organization members have jumped at the possibility. An important common denominator for the organizations is their focus on organized, structured work. Their mantra is: “We want to work in an organized way”. No one expressed the desire to be more loosely connected, work ad-hoc, or take individual action. But because of their background, it is clear that it was not their experience with organizational work that led them to think this was the most fruitful approach. Rather, it was their unsatisfactory experience of working as individuals or with small, unorganized groups that made them want to contribute in an organized fashion. It would be interesting to see if a similar trend is shown in Syrians in neighboring countries, and those reaching Europe and the US.

At the same time, the focus on organization seems to be achieved only internally. The different organizations are not united, some not even aware of the other organizations in the same area doing the same work. They do not represent a collective front or work together.
They do not face the authorities, in form of the Egyptian ministries or the UNHCR, as a united group, but approach them one group at a time. They largely have the same focus, but do not cooperate in an organized way. This can hinder their ability to create change in an effective way, making them unable to advance from their status as service providers.

It is difficult to say what their services mean for the group they are supposed to be helping. As I have looked at the organizations themselves, not the beneficiaries, I can only comment on what the members are taking away from the experience. However, the organizations’ dedication to their own community and their focus on sustainable aid should represent more of a positive effect on the beneficiaries’ wellbeing than short-term aid provided by international organizations that pull out again after the emergency operation is over. In addition, the organizations create meeting places of refuge between people who would not ordinarily meet. The community can this way build networks and connect with others in the same situation. At the same time, a divide can be created between the organization members and the beneficiaries. The members are rapidly advancing, getting work experience and skills in voluntary participation and civil organization. Several of their high-ranking members and leaders are already distanced from the vulnerable members of the community. They are influential and highly educated persons; they have respect and get recognition within the group. Through the organizations, members can advance their status and get connections in the INGOs, moving on from the small, Syrian organizations to higher paying jobs. The danger in this for the organizations is that they are becoming elitist groups, catering to their own, while the intermeshing with the INGOs causes them to lose their active and able members to international organizations.

As many Syrians, including organization members, are leaving or have left Egypt, the future seems uncertain for the Syrian organizations. Egypt has become a more unstable and inhospitable climate, and the organizations lose the funding on which they are dependent. Furthermore, resourceful people are leaving, causing a brain drain of the Syrian diaspora in Egypt. For those that stay on, Egypt may represent a waiting room for them until they can return. Through the organizations, they have created a field of experimentation that could help build sustainable civil society in their own country.
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All interviews were conducted in Cairo. Informants listed by first name only are anonymized, for reasons outlined in the methodology section.