

## **Religious Plurality and the Politics of Representation in Refugee Camps: Accounting for the Lived Experiences of Syrian Refugees Living in Zaatari**

By Kat Eghdamian

*A review of existing literature in forced migration studies and of UNHCR policies on refugee camps reveals a paucity of engagement with issues of religious identity, religious plurality, and religious experience in refugee camp settings. This article asks why this is so and posits that an engagement with these issues is urgently needed. Drawing on the current humanitarian crisis in Syria, it argues for the importance of accounting for the lived experiences of Syrian refugees living in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. An exploration of such lived experiences can reveal necessary knowledge about the role of religion in forced migration studies for both academics and practitioners in the field, as well as give rise to more meaningful engagement with and effective protection and assistance policies for forced migrants.*

### **Introduction**

This article briefly reviews existing literature in forced migration studies on its treatment of religion, religious plurality, and the politics of representation of religion in refugee camps. In doing so, it reveals a paucity of research on the role of religion in the lived experiences of refugees, especially religious minorities. Within the context of the Syrian conflict, it is argued that it is crucial to undertake an examination and assessment of the role of religion in Zaatari camp life so that the lived experiences of Syrian refugees are accounted for, in all their plurality and forms. The structure of the article is as follows. First, a brief literature review will be offered on how religion in development theory and practice has been approached to date. Second, the Syrian humanitarian conflict is introduced as a case to illustrate gaps in the literature's treatment of religion and reflect on what remains unknown about life at the Zaatari refugee camp. The article concludes with a call for taking religious identities, beliefs, and practices seriously, not only in theoretical explorations and examinations of humanitarianism but also in policies and practices in the field.

### **Religion in Development Theory and Practice**

Academic interest and inquiry into the role of religion, religious identities, and individual and collective religious practices has increased since the attacks of 11 September 2001 ('post 9/11'). However, within international development theory and practice, the role of religion has been largely left out of academic inquiry (Deneulin & Bano 2009). It has only been in the past decade that development thinkers and researchers have contributed significant research and findings on religion, not only on the role of Islam or Christianity but also on a plurality of religious traditions in a range of development issues. These works offered a clear move away from, and critique of, the secularisation thesis that had shaped development theory and practice for decades (Deneulin & Bano 2009; Ager & Ager 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Ager 2013). While there is now extensive literature exploring the relationship between religion and development (Marshall 2001; Clarke 2006; Deneulin & Bano 2009), only recently has there been a growing focus on the relationship between religion and humanitarianism (Ferris 2005; De Cordier 2009). As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011: 429) has outlined, to date, the role of religion in forced migration has been generally examined in two ways: first, as a cause of displacement, for instance in asylum cases based on the grounds of religious persecution (Mayer 2007; Türk 2008); and second, as a significant factor in experiences of both internal and international displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011). These latter contributions have explored a number of ways in which religious identities and practices influence, inform, and impact the lives of refugees. Although valuable, they have also been limited. For instance, studies have had to marginalise minority issues in order to contribute initial research on Christianity and Islam (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Ager 2013: 20).

Despite humanitarian needs having increased around the world (UNOCHA 2013), the role of religion in the politics and practice of refugee protection as well as the role of religion in forced migration more generally remains understudied. Specifically, there is a lack of research on religious experiences (particularly those of religious minorities) *in refugee camps*. In addition, there is also a need for theoretical contributions to forced migration literature that examine the institutional and operational aspects of displacement in response to religious minority issues within a post-secular setting. A critical discourse analysis of different actors' assumptions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of religious minorities in refugee camps can offer new thinking on post-9/11 secular language as it relates to humanitarian contexts working with multi-religious groups. It has been posited that these contexts will also raise questions on associated assumptions about religious groups, which have the potential to

raise further reflections on the nature and operation of values, rights, and institutional responsibilities (Ngo & Hansen 2013). The next section further reflects on these issues by briefly examining the role of religion for Syrian refugees living in the world's second largest refugee camp.

### Syrian Refugees and Religious Plurality in Zaatari

The Syrian humanitarian crisis has resulted in the displacement of over 2.5 million persons, with approximately 120,000 people currently living in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan (hereafter, Zaatari). Since its opening in July 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has produced and disseminated a number of public reports on Zaatari refugee demographics, experiences, and needs. Whilst relatively comprehensive in relation to demographic data on the age and gender of registered refugees, as well as their material needs and health conditions, a review of these reports reveals an understating of the role of religion in camp life, overlooking the presence and experiences of religious minorities altogether.<sup>1</sup> This is despite a number of UNHCR policies regarding appropriate treatment of the religious beliefs and practices of refugees, and its commitment to the particular needs and rights of religious minorities. These include its 'Age, Gender and Diversity' policy (UNHCR 2011), its increasing focus on partnering with faith-based organisations in line with the High Commissioner's 'Faith and Protection Dialogue' (UNHCR 2012), and its recent 'Welcoming the Stranger' initiative (UNHCR 2013). In a similar vein, Western media reports continue to offer selective representations of Zaatari refugees with no accounts of religious plurality, let alone the importance of religion in camp life.<sup>2</sup> However, reports on the Syrian conflict have highlighted increasing sectarian and religious divisions, including a rise in persecutions of Christians in Syria (Rand 2013).

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the rise in sectarian and religious divisions in Syria has resulted in the presence of a number of distinct religious groups among the Syrian refugee population. During a recent visit to Zaatari, the USCIRF found that religious minority refugees from Syria are not registering with UNHCR out of fear they will be targeted in the camp (USCIRF 2013a). The USCIRF therefore raised concerns that if religious minorities begin fleeing Syria *en masse* and seek shelter in refugee camps, they could become vulnerable to reprisal attacks based on sectarian and religious lines.<sup>3</sup> In response, UNHCR reported that it does not have the resources to develop a programme that would protect religious minorities in refugee camps (Ibid.: 2), despite reports of increasing refugee flows of religious minorities to Zaatari (Rand 2013; USCIRF 2013b). Subsequently, there is growing concern among minority rights advocates that religious minority refugees may not be receiving the assistance and protection they need. As humanitarian response sites increasingly work with displaced communities belonging to different religious groups, UNHCR may therefore continue to face these challenges as it responds to refugee protection and assistance.

### Conclusion

Taken together, then, there is much to be done to contribute to forced migration literature in its treatment of religious plurality and the politics of representation of religion in refugee camps. Primarily, there is a need to challenge language on the secularisation of forced migration to date and the ideas and assumptions related to perceptions of refugee identities, experiences, and needs. Among its many lessons, the Syrian humanitarian crisis has revealed that it is not only timely to account for the lived experiences of refugees, but to examine the negotiated encounters between such experiences and institutional responses to them.

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<sup>1</sup>The Syrian general population is made up of 87% Muslims (74% Sunni, 13% Shiites, Alawites, Twelvers, Ismailis, or Zaydis), 10% Christians, 3% Druze, with no official statistics on minorities such as Jews, Baha'is, and non-religionists (Minority Rights Group International 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See the Aljazeera video series sponsored by UNHCR entitled 'Zaatari: A Day in the Life'.

<sup>3</sup> Sectarian rhetoric on the civil war has included reports that the al-Assad regime is planting individuals within refugee camps to play on sectarian fears (USCIRF 2013b: 6).

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