Humanitarianism as a Modality of Governance and Social Space: Insights from the Arab Levant and Turkey

The forced migration flows into the Arab Levant and Turkey - earlier from occupied Palestine, then Sudan and Iraq, and more recently from Syria – and processes of internal displacement (Eg. Kurds in Syria and Turkey) raised the importance of humanitarian governance and programming as key factors in shaping new domestic and transnational politics in the management of social space and in the control over individuals. Drawing on my previous research in the Arab Levant and Turkey, in this lecture I will illustrate three ways in which humanitarianism can exercise sovereignty over space, time, and livelihoods.

Focusing on the aftermath of the 2011–2015 forced migration from Syria to the city of Halba in northern Lebanon, I will first discuss refugee self-reliance practices vis-à-vis international humanitarian livelihood programming. By highlighting the limits of building top-down forms of refugee self-reliance in long-term displacement settings, humanitarian livelihood programs turn out to be a means to leisure. In this framework, the increasingly debated 'urban-humanitarian' nexus as a way to support refugee self-reliance is unable to grasp the articulated character of local resources and infrastructure. A second study of mine will deconstruct crisis by showing that border closure during wartime and displacement have actually stopped the fluid livelihoods system between Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, which historically relied on a long genealogy of smuggling and border relations. Indeed, human mobility has historically sustained border residents, in addition to producing their border identities. Third, I will discuss the moral hierarchy that humanitarian governance triggers by either acknowledging or undercutting particular aid providers in the humanitarian arena: I will bring the example of de facto Syrian NGOs in Lebanon, often established and led by activists, ex-protesters, Syrian migrant workers, and religious leaders who have 'become' relief providers since the crisis broke out in 2011. In this context, faith-based aid providers are viewed by the international community (both in the context of Syria and more broadly) as communities that do not fulfil key international humanitarian principles such as neutrality and impartiality as they are assumed to prioritize in-group members.

Readings:

Carpi, E. (2020) "Towards a Neo-Cosmetic Humanitarianism. Refugee Self-Reliance as a Social Cohesion Regime in Lebanon's Halba". Journal of Refugee Studies 33(1): 224-244.

Feldman, I. (2012) "The Challenge of Categories: UNRWA and the Definition of a Palestine Refugee", Journal of Refugee Studies, 25(3): 387-406.

Krever, T. (2011) "Mopping-up": UNHCR, Neutrality and Non-Refoulement since the Cold War", Chinese Journal of International Law: 587-608.

Janmyr, M. and Mourad, L. (2018) "Modes of Ordering: Labelling, Classification and Categorization in Lebanon's Refugee Response", Journal of Refugee Studies 31(4): 544-565.